

OCTOBER 1950

IMAGINATION

SCIENCE
and FANTASY

IMAGINATION

Stories of

SCIENCE and FANTASY

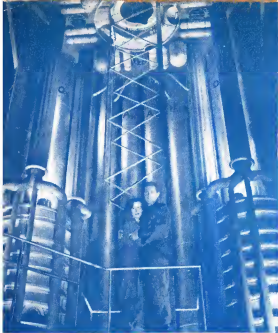
FIRST OCTOBER 1950 **35¢**
ISSUE

THE SOUL STEALERS

By CHESTER S. GEIER

ERIC NEVILLE · HOG PHILLIPS
WILLARD HAYKINS





Surrounded by fuel tanks in the interior of the rocket, Dr. Liso Van Meter (Oso Mossen) and Col. Floyd Oldhom (Lloyd Bridges) pose for newspaper photographers before take-off.

IMAGINATION'S Hollywood reporter, Forrest J. Ackerman, interviews star of the film in the control room of the rocketship.



ROCKETSHIP

"X-M"

In the second scientific film that Hollywood has made about the Moon, the rocket (a one hundred and eighty foot, multi-stage job) doesn't get to our satellite at all—it goes right on to Mars! Pictures on this page and continued on our inside back cover show various scenes of interest from the forthcoming Lippert Productions film.

(Continued on Inside Back Cover)

Dr. Karl Eckstrom (John Emery) explains: "Our cabin is pressurized and gyro-controlled, keeping us in a level position."



TABLE OF CONTENTS

OCTOBER

VOLUME 1

1950

NUMBER 1



STORIES

THE SOUL STEALERS

(Novelette—15,000 words)by Chester S. Geier..... 6

Illustrated by Hannes Bok

She came out of the night, a strange beautiful girl, seeking men—and their souls!

WIND IN HER HAIR

(Short Story—7,300 words)by Kris Neville 40

Illustrated by Bill Terry

"Johnny, can we have babies whenever we wish—without waiting for someone to die?"

ONE FOR THE ROBOT—TWO FOR THE SAME

(Novelette—10,000 words)by Rog Phillips 58

Illustrated by Joe W. Tillotson

His secret was one that could drive a man mad—or give him immortality . . .

LOOK TO THE STARS

(Novel—30,000 words)by Willard Hawkins 82

Illustrated by Bill Terry

They were the dregs of humanity and no loss to the world—at least this one . . .

INHERITANCE

(Short Story—3,500 words)by Edward W. Ludwig.....150

Illustrated by Bill Terry

The world was just the same—but suddenly he was the only living creature in it!

FEATURES

ROCKETSHIP "X-M" 2 CLEAR CHANNEL ONE! 81

THE EDITORIAL 4 BRAIN WAVES AND MURDER 81

EVERYTHING MOVES! 39 LETTER PAGE 160

Front cover painting by Hannes Bok, illustrating "The Soul Stealers"

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The Editorial

GUEST EDITORIAL BY FORREST J. ACKERMAN

YOU could have knocked me over with a piece of nullified gravity when Ray Palmer informed me that **OTHER WORLDS** was to have a companion magazine called **IMAGINATION!** For here, Phoenix-like, rising from the past was a magazine of the future.

I edited a magazine called **IMAGINATION** back in 1937 and 1938—a fan magazine. It just goes to show there's no way to keep a good title down. I have every hope and expectation that the new **IMAGINATION** will prove as popular as the old. My fan magazine was edited for the Los Angeles chapter of the Science Fiction League. This club organ was read all over the world—in France, England, Canada, Germany and Australia. I expect the same will be true of the new **IMAGINATION**.

IF the new **IMAGINATION** parallels the development of its fan predecessor, it will become famous for pioneering new paths, for daring new dreams, for being foresighted, different and unusual—not merely up-to-date but up-to-tomorrow!

I remember giving Ray Bradbury his first publication in the January 1938 issue of my fan **IMAGINATION**. A dozen years later Bradbury is the fair-haired boy of science fiction. I think that the editors of the new **IMAGINATION**, in featuring a story ("Wind In Her Hair") by Kris Neville, will in later years be point-

ed to as editors of remarkable vision. For it is my prophecy that Neville has set his foot firmly on the ladder of fantasy success and will continue to climb it in these pages. I also look forward to seeing Ray Bradbury in these pages—back to the title that gave him his first break into print.

MANY stellar names of science fiction, many masters of fantasy, contributed to the magazine I once edited. Fond memories arise of Merritt, Lovecraft, Heinlein, Bloch, Kuttner, Price, and many others who have made their mark in fantasy's Hall of Fame. I look forward to an equally stellar array of talent in the **IMAGINATION** of today.

I always liked the statement that Robert Heinlein made back in 1937 in the letter section of my fan magazine. He said: "I believe science fiction to be a major constructive force for civilization." And he was but unconsciously paraphrasing what editor Ray Palmer said 20 years ago: "Science fiction is pregnant with wonderful possibilities for development into a new and infinitely beneficial type of literature."

THE period of gestation is past; the hour of burgeoning is upon us; the flowering of fantasy is also the fruition of science fiction. I have an especial interest in **IMAGINATION** because it is like the rebirth of a child who for many years

lay in suspended animation. I hope (and feel confident) that in IMAGINATION the field of science and fantasy will experience its finest hour, and that we shall look with pride together on issues to come.

BUT everything I have said has been based on imagination—let me turn this editorial over now to the man himself—the one who can really concretely tell you what to expect of this magazine. In relinquishing the typewriter I offer a toast: “To the Magazine OF the future—WITH a future!” . . . FJA.

* * *

FORRIE Ackerman has stated simply, and all-inclusively what your editors feel as this first issue reaches you. There are many magazines in the science-fantasy field on the stands today. There will probably be many more in the future. We are confident that IMAGINATION will always be among them—leading the way.

THIS new magazine is not just another magazine to buy. Take its title: IMAGINATION. There is no other word in the English language that so expressly states the field of literature it represents. There is no other title extant that lends dignity to fantasy fiction as IMAGINATION does and will continue to do. We intend that this magazine shall have but one guiding policy: quality. We mean quality in stories as well as covers, artwork, and general features. Of course, we are primarily concerned with stories. In IMAGINATION you will read the best fiction obtainable—in both the science and fantasy categories.

WE don't mean formula space operas and the other hackney-

ed plots so general in the field. We mean stories of people and their problems of the future. Stories in which you yourself might very well be the main character. Stories that are visionary. Stories with a sound premise. We mean tales of fantasy in the Merritt tradition. Stories where some care has been taken with the writing, where the love of creation is evident in the author's work. Take Chet Geier's lead story in this issue. A simple story, told in the smoothly beautiful style that has made Geier one of the country's leading science-fantasy writers. There is a definite Merritt quality to this tale that we're sure you won't mistake. And Kris Neville with his magnificent “Wind In Her Hair.” A moving little tale that will pluck at your heart; it is written simply and with beauty.

STORIES of this type are perhaps indicative of what IMAGINATION will bring you in the years ahead. We say perhaps because we will set no policy other than quality. We may miss it at times, but we want to know when we do. That's where you come in. You want the best and have a right to expect it. We want to give you the best and will always lend a ready ear to your suggestions.

AND another thing: we will give you name writers, true — men who have proven their capability in writing fine lasting fiction—but you will see new writers in these pages. Writers with stories to tell—stories well written with clever ideas and new approaches to old ones. As Forrie Ackerman prophesied, we intend to be the medium for the best—in the future. We will call your at-

(Continued on page 57)

THE SOUL STEALERS

by Chester S. Geier

Wraithlike, they came out of the darkness—dead men who walked among the living. What grim secret lay in their sightless eyes—a warning to all other men!

A chill touched Bryan as he looked down at the figure on the hospital bed. He had seen dead men before—too many of them. He had seen them sprawled on European battlefields, had seen them huddled in wrecked cars or lying waxen and stiff on morgue slabs.

But he had never seen a dead man like the one who lay there on the bed. For, paradoxically, this man was still alive. He still breathed, his heart still pulsed. Yet it was clear that these were little more than automatic processes. In the only respect that mattered, he was as truly dead as though in the last stages of dissolution and decay.

He lay on the bed with an unnatural supineness, his head lolling at a slack angle. His eyes were open in a blank stare, eyes as empty as a waiting grave. He did not move. He made no sound. A thread of saliva ran from a corner of his gaping mouth and made a glistening path down the side of his jaw.

A mindless idiot would have shown more animation than this man. Something vital and precious had gone from him, leaving him a mere shell. His was a death-

in-life, a thing somehow more terrible than a shattered skull or a torn chest.

Bryan fought back a shudder and turned to the balding white-clad man at his side. "What can you tell me, Dave? Just what seems to be wrong with this fellow?"

The doctor sighed. "Wish I knew, Terry. I've never seen anything like it in over twenty years of medical practice. Not even the specialists seem to know. And we have several good ones here, who donate their services to the hospital—men with experience in unusual cases."

"But don't you have any idea at all about how he got this way?" Bryan persisted. "Isn't there any possibility that he has some sort of rare brain disease?"

"We gave him a careful examination, Terry," the doctor returned. "We could find no evidence of disease—no evidence of concussion or injury, either. Except, maybe, for one thing."

"What's that?" Bryan asked quickly.

"When he was first brought in, we found a sort of reddish mark near his left shoulder. As though



There was danger in the presence of this girl—and yet somehow, Terry Bryan knew he must reach her . . .

something hot had touched him. The skin wasn't broken or burned, however." The doctor shrugged. "It's gone now. I doubt if anything so light and temporary could have been important, anyway."

"This might be a case for the psychiatrists," Bryan suggested slowly. "Maybe this fellow had a terrific shock of some kind — a psychic trauma, or whatever they call it."

"That's quite possible. But we've done the best we could at this end."

The doctor's voice dropped. "I don't think there's going to be time for anything else, Terry."

"You mean that he——"

The doctor nodded. "He's dying. I've seen the signs. It's as though he's lost all will to live."

BRYAN looked at the man on the bed again, grim speculation in his eyes. His voice was solemn and soft. "Maybe I'm just a superstitious Irishman, Dave—but I think I know what's the matter with this

fellow. I knew it the first time I looked at him. He's lost something—something you can't see with microscopes or X-ray machines. It's something damned important—and that's why he's dying. What he's lost, Dave, is . . . his soul."

"I'm not laughing, Terry. Oddly enough, I have the same opinion. A doctor keeps running into situations like this, where ideas thrown into the discard by the so-called scientific attitude have to be dusted off and put back to work."

There was silence. An elevator made distant noises somewhere in the building. White-clad nurses moved crisply by in the hall beyond the open door. Late Spring sunshine was bright behind the drawn shade at the window. Life and movement, the mundane and familiar. But in this room thoughts probed beyond the earthly facade and found a mystery, a wonder as old as Man.

Bryan moved his muscular shoulders as though against an invisible resistance. Then, slowly, still fighting that resistance, he reached into the breast pocket of his rumpled tweed jacket and produced a pencil and a wrinkled but otherwise clean envelope. Most reporters carried notepads about with them; some even went in for stenographers' shorthand notebooks. But to Bryan news was something more than mere details. It was a thing of human and emotional qualities, and these he carried in his head like songs—some gay and humorous, many more tragic and sad.

This characteristic had given his by-line its great popularity with *Courier* readers. When he needed to remember details at all—comparatively unimportant facts like dates and numbers—he recorded them on envelopes.

"Anything else you can tell me about this man, Dave? Who he is, where he lives?"

The doctor fingered a slip of paper from a pocket of his white smock. "Here's his name and address. I had an interne copy them down from the stuff we found in his clothes. Knew you'd want them, Terry." He grinned briefly, a grin of real affection, then sobered. "The police did some checking on him. I talked to a detective just before you showed up.

"Seems this patient lived alone at a rooming house. A widower. No family. Worked as a dental technician for a small company in the Loop. It appears he was in the habit of spending his evenings in Grant Park. He was found there this morning, you know, just the way he is now."

"Grant Park," Bryan echoed. "That makes three. Three, Dave."

The doctor looked puzzled. "I don't get it, Terry."

"I didn't get around to this business until now, but two other men were found in Grant Park. Like this. They were taken to private hospitals."

"Good Lord!" the doctor breathed, startled. "This goes deeper than I thought. There must be

something in Grant Park——”

“Something that I intend to look into,” Bryan said quietly. “There’s a story here—if I can dig it out.”

He thrust the envelope and pencil back into his jacket, together with the slip of paper he had been given. “I’ll be running along, Dave. Thanks for your tip. It was swell of you to remember me.”

The other gestured as he followed Bryan into the hall and toward the elevators. “Maybe I had an ulterior motive. Ruth and I have been wondering why you never drop in any more.”

“I’ve been running a rat-race,” Bryan said.

“You look it, Terry. You don’t look as well as you did when you first came back from overseas.”

“What a big medicine bottle you have, doc!”

“I’m serious, Terry. I’ve had an idea you weren’t happy about things, and now I’m sure of it. What seems to be the trouble? Your job?”

“The job’s all right.”

“You won’t tell an old friend?”

Bryan lifted his hands. “Hell, Dave, I don’t know just what is wrong. But it might be something like this. I fought a little war of my own, a personal war, to make the world a better place. Now that I’m back, though, it’s the same old world——only a lot worse. And a reporter gets to see too much of the worse side.”

“One man can’t change the world, Terry,” the doctor said. “All he

can do it make the best of his small piece of it. . . . What you need to do is to get married and raise a family. And while on the subject, what became of that pretty girl reporter you brought around with you a couple of times?”

“Joyce? She’s still with the paper.”

“She seemed like a sensible person. Make a nice wife.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. He stopped in front of the elevator and held out his hand. “Thanks again, Dave. I’ll drop in some evening, when the rat-race slows up a little. My love to Ruth.”

“Take care of yourself, Terry.” The doctor stood watching as the elevator doors closed on Bryan’s figure. A worried frown deepened the lines in his forehead.

OUTSIDE, on the sidewalk before the hospital, Bryan lighted a cigarette. He stood there for some minutes, a big man in a rumpled tweed suit, his hat pushed back on thick brown hair that had a coppery glint in the bright sunshine. He had powerful shoulders, and the hands that went with them, but his face was fine-carved and sensitive—the face of an artist, or a dreamer. There was that paradox in him. And in that paradox was his personal tragedy. For while his strength took him easily through the deceit and cruelty of life, the stupidity and ugliness, the memory of each encounter remained with him like a scar.

The scars were beginning to show a bit too plainly. It had taken Dave to make him realize that.

Dave. . . What was it Dave had said? There was an importance in the words.

"One man can't change the world, Terry."

That was it. Bryan considered the remark now, intently.

Was that what he really wanted to do—change the world? He groped among old ideals and ambitions for the answer.

In the beginning he had wanted to create — to create by writing about people, about life. But to write about life required knowing it. He had become a reporter.

What he had learned of life was evilness, greed, suffering, ignorance. He could not write of that and still create as he had dreamed. But he could fight it. He could fight it wherever he found it, little by little. And he had fought. It was all that had kept him going.

A fool's mission, doomed to failure. Dave was right.

Bryan had his answer now. He didn't want to change the world. He wanted to do something even more impossible — he wanted to make a world of his own.

He grinned sourly and flipped the remains of the cigarette away. Hailing a cab, then, he rode to the *Courier Building*.

* * *

The city room was filled with the old familiar clamor, the rattle of typewriters and teletypes, the

shrilling of telephones, the undulant babble of voices. Bryan waved in answer to greetings as he threaded his way to his desk. He rolled a sheet of paper into his typewriter, lighted a cigarette, and rubbed his face. Then he straightened with a jerk and began hitting the typewriter keys with the first and second fingers of each hand.

Managing Editor Frank Sanders hurried past with a bulging file envelope, his vest open and his stiff white hair a usual disorderly tangle. He whirled as though Bryan's presence had only then registered on him.

"Terry! Where the hell have you been?" He jerked a thumb. "My office. Right away."

Bryan finished a paragraph and then followed Sanders into his glass-enclosed cubicle. He slumped into a chair and waited.

Sanders tried without success to light a clogged pipe. He dropped it back into the ashtray and said abruptly, "That Holzheimer story, Terry. You did a nice job clearing the kid, but your copy was pretty rough on the district attorney. Too rough, Terry."

"I should have thrown a street-car at him," Bryan said. "Trying to frame a kid and build up a record."

"Circumstantial evidence and reelection, Terry. It happens all the time—you ought to know. And you ought to know we're politically on the D. A.'s side of the fence. Stories like the one you wrote about the

Holzheimer case will only hurt the campaign this paper is putting on."

"Sometimes there's too much incompetence to whitewash—even if it comes from the right side of the fence."

Sanders shook his disorderly thatch. "You ought to know better than that, Terry. You've been around long enough. This is no time to get a rush of ideals to the head."

"I've never pulled my punches," Bryan returned quietly.

"I know. But we just can't have any more stories like the one on the Holzheimer case." Sanders leaned forward at his desk, his eyes suddenly shrewd. "What's eating on you, Terry?"

Bryan shrugged. "Things like the Holzheimer business."

"It's all part of a system," Sanders said slowly. "You can't change that system any more than you can change human nature, Terry. All you can do is make the best of it. I hope you'll look at it that way. I've seen too many good reporters go sour over what they keep running into."

A telephone jangled on the desk. Sanders spoke into it briefly and returned his attention to Bryan.

"Working on anything now, Terry?"

Bryan explained about the three weirdly afflicted men who had been found in Grant Park. "I'm planning to look into it," he finished.

"Sounds like something big is involved," Sanders approved. "Go

ahead with it, Terry. . . . And take things easy, will you?" he added as Bryan started toward the door.

"Sure," Bryan said.

Back at his desk, Bryan finished typing his copy. He was pencilling corrections when Joyce Mayhew appeared.

"Hi, Terry!" She perched on the edge of a neighboring desk, a slim dark girl with a wide humorous mouth and expressive hazel eyes. She was simply dressed as always, but gave a characteristic impression of fashionable elegance. "What have you got there—a scoop, or a love letter?"

"It could be my last will and testament," Bryan said. He stood up and called to a copyboy. "Have you had lunch?" he asked Joyce, then.

"I was hoping somebody would ask me. Somebody like you, Terry."

"Consider yourself asked. Let's go."

THEY sat in a booth in a small restaurant on a side street near the *Courier* Building. Joyce's eyes were grave as she studied Bryan's face over the top of her menu.

"Anything in that last will and testament crack you made, Terry?" she asked at last. "I saw you come out of Sanders' office."

He shrugged, mobile lips twisting into a wry grin. "Nothing that serious. I just had my wrist slapped. Over the way I handled the Holzheimer story."

"There was quite a bit of talk about that up at the office. Sanders let you off easy. But Terry, you seem to have been hitting out at things a little too hard. What's the matter—a disappointed love life?"

"You know as much about my love life as I do."

"Really?" She looked down to finger a spoon, sudden pain and wistfulness in her averted face.

"I saw Dave at the County Hospital," he went on. "You remember Dave."

"Yes—and his wife's cooking and his lovely children."

"Dave mentioned you. He seemed to feel I've been neglecting him."

"Maybe you've been neglecting a lot of people, Terry."

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, an action compounded of agreement, weariness—and despair. "I suppose that's true. People and I seem to have been going off in opposite directions. Take Dave. He's satisfied with what he's doing. I can't talk to him without being reminded of my own dissatisfaction. He can't talk to me without knowing that something's wrong."

Joyce reached across the table and caught his hand. "Terry — don't let it get you!"

He forced a grin. "With me it's work as usual. And this time it's something off the beaten path — something darned queer." He told her of the dead-alive man at the hospital and of the link to the other Grant Park victims. He straighten-

ed, animation quickening in his face, his melancholy forgotten.

"Three men," he finished grimly. "There's a kind of continuity to the thing. I'm going to watch the park, Joyce. I have the idea that what happened is going to happen again. I want to know just what was done to those men, just what sort of agency is at the bottom of it."

Her face was troubled. "Terry . . . it frightens me! If something strange is really going on, you might get hurt—the way those men were hurt. I wish—" She broke off with a helpless gesture. "Be careful, Terry! Please be careful!"

BRYAN sat on a stool in one corner of a small dimly lighted bar, frowning down at an envelope on which he had drawn a diagram of Grant Park. He had spent part of the afternoon checking on the locations where the three men had been found. These, it appeared, were concentrated roughly near the middle of the park, around a large sandstone memorial pavilion which was the center of numerous converging walks. He had visited the spot while daylight remained, familiarizing himself with it in preparation for his night vigil.

Glancing at his watch now, Bryan slid off the stool and went to a telephone alcove. He dialed a number quickly. There was a delay while an extension connection was made.

"Dave?" he said, then. "Terry

at this end. How's the patient?"

"Dead, Terry. Not half an hour ago. We tried everything—oxygen, heart stimulants. It was no use. I knew it was going to happen all along and stayed to do what I could. I was just getting ready to go home."

"I checked up on the others who were found in the park," Bryan resumed. "They died, too. In about the same length of time as your patient."

"Good Lord, Terry! It . . . it's horrible somehow. What in the name of reason could be back of it?"

"I'm working on that angle right now. I'll let you know if I turn up anything. . . . Thanks, Dave." Bryan hung up and went back to the bar. He finished his drink, lighted a cigarette, and strode outside.

Darkness had thickened along the street, a soft warm darkness, rich with the promise of approaching summer. A block's walk brought Bryan to the boulevard. Grant Park lay just across from him, lights shining fairy-like throughout its shadowed length.

He crossed with the traffic light, hands in his pockets, a man just strolling along on a pleasant evening. But his gray eyes were alert and grim. Vivid in his mind was the memory of a man in a hospital bed, a man who breathed and yet was not alive.

The park swallowed him. He walked directly toward the memor-

ial pavilion, moving without haste, without apparent purpose or destination.

The pavilion took shape in the quiet gloom, a temple-like place of flowerbeds and radiating walks. On the benches around it was a scattering of romantic couples and lonely men sprawled in sleep. The atmosphere was one of serenity and peace. To Bryan it seemed briefly incredible that danger could threaten here. Yet in this vicinity three men had been struck down by something that had left them mere shells of flesh without the will to live.

He made a complete circuit of the pavilion without a glimpse of anything unusual or suspicious. Finally, choosing a bench thick in shadow and partly screened by bushes, he sat down to wait.

Time passed slowly in the lulling murmur of leaves and the distant drone of passing automobiles. The sleeping men on neighboring benches awoke one by one, stretched, and plodded away into the darkness. The spooning couples shared a last embrace and vanished in turn. Before much longer the benches around Bryan were deserted. But he knew that other persons might still be lingering in spots not visible to him.

The quiet had deepened. Bryan shifted cramped and protesting muscles and peered impatiently at the radium dial of his watch. The hour was already a late one. Soon it would be too late for what he had

hoped would happen. Everyone would have left the neighborhood of the pavilion.

Hope was fading in Bryan, but he forced himself to remain where he was. More time passed. A deep somnolent hush lay over the pavilion. Even the continual rustling of leaves now seemed muted and remote. The sky pressed down, a soft dark blanket lavishly strewn with points of brilliance. In the silver gloom the lamps spaced along the walks shone with an ethereal phosphorescent quality.

Bryan slumped on the bench in resignation. He was certain now that nothing would happen. Not tonight, at least. And in his disappointment he wondered if there had been some warning of his presence. Or had what he had been waiting for already taken place, without his having been aware of it?

His tiredness blunted the question. Rest seemed more important now. He'd go to his furnished room and sleep. This was just the first night. There would be other nights. He'd wait and watch until something finally happened.

But right now there was no further need for caution. He could have a smoke. He could stand up to ease his aching muscles.

HE was reaching for his cigarettes when he heard the sound rising above the murmur of leaves. The sound of wings. There was a rushing power to them, a massive beat. And listening, Bryan had the

swift certainty that it was nothing familiar that flew through the night. He crouched on the bench, frozen, searching the jeweled sky.

Then another sound — a girl's questioning voice, shrill with alarm.

Bryan swung and saw two figures against the pale outlines of the pavilion, one evidently the girl he had heard and the other that of a man accompanying her. They must have been nearby without his having noticed them. The sound of approaching wings had drawn them into view.

Bryan's pulses leaped in dread excitement. Was it going to happen now—like this? Did whatever it was that had deprived three men of the will to live ride the air on great wings?

The thought brought a chill dismay. His eyes widened on the two figures before the pavilion. If some strange attack portended, he could not stand idly by and watch it happen. The man and girl were too clearly exposed, in possible great danger.

Bryan was tensing his muscles when the beating wings swept by overhead. His glance jerked upward. He stared in numbed disbelief.

A huge bird-like shape was gliding down toward the pavilion. Flying beside it, grotesquely like fighter planes escorting a giant bomber, were a number of smaller shapes—vaguely man-like. But it was not this sight alone that filled Bryan with nightmare amazement. For

astride the bird-thing was a slender-limbed figure in veil-like garments—a girl. And against the dark backdrop of the sky, girl and winged creatures alike all seemed to shine with an eerie glow, a luminous radiance.

Impossibility! Madness! Bryan's thoughts whirled in chaos. This bizarre scene couldn't be real. He was suffering a delusion. His long vigil on the bench had lulled him into a dream-like state in which he was experiencing a fantasti vision.

But even as he told himself this, he knew he was very much awake. And he knew that what he saw was no mere vision. For a scream from the girl before the pavilion testified that she and her companion saw it also.

The fantastic winged shapes were slanting downward. Bryan realized they were moving directly toward the man and girl. The couple stood immobile, rigid, as though spell-bound by the utter weirdness of what they saw.

Bryan shouted a hoarse warning and started forward. He did not know what he could possibly do. No rational purpose motivated him. His action was instinctive, an appalled protest against what he feared was about to take place.

Bryan's warning registered upon the couple. They seemed abruptly aware of their danger. The man caught at the girl's arm as if to draw her with him in flight. But now terror struck her with its full impact, and her body began crump-

ling in a faint even as she turned to follow. Her companion hesitated in dismay, concern for the girl obviously struggling against desire for escape.

One of the smaller flying monstrosities had pulled ahead of the others. Skimming several feet above the ground, it darted at the man.

Closer now, Bryan was able to make out details that previously had escaped him. The creature was the size of a child, with two pairs of arms, its lean body human in shape. It had large bulging eyes in a small hairless head. Its face projected in a long tapering needle-like proboscis, which together with delicate gauzy wings gave the appearance of an enormous insect—a mosquito. The luminous radiance that glowed from the thing was not the only remaining unearthly feature; Bryan discovered that it was mistily transparent as well, somehow unsubstantial.

The man saw the winged apparition coming at him. His hands lifted in defense, but in the next instant the creature's needle-shaped snout plunged into his chest like a thrust sword. Then, with a blur of wings, the creature pulled free and circled away. The man did not move again. He stood with hands still defensively raised, statuesque, frozen. It was as if a lightning paralysis had struck him.

BRYAN checked himself sharply, shocked by what he had seen.

There was a wrenching unexpectedness about it, a chilling weirdness. And yet it held a certain logic, a deadly significance. For Bryan recalled what Dave had told him about the previous park victim. The man had been found with a queer reddish mark near the shoulder — a mark that presently had vanished. Now Bryan thought he knew how it had been caused. But how could an object penetrate flesh and bone—as he had seen the flying thing's needle-like proboscis pierce the chest of the man before the pavilion—and still make no wound, leave only a reddish mark that soon faded?

Only a few instants had passed. The winged band was still descending toward the pavilion. But Bryan's presence on the scene had been noticed. Two of the mosquito-men—their appearance automatically suggested the term—were even now curving toward him.

Bryan saw them approach. He tensed, fighting back his dismay.

Flight was out of the question. He had seen the mosquito-men in action and knew they could easily overtake him. That left only——

Bryan whipped off his jacket. He flailed at his attackers with it as they closed in. They darted back, their huge eyes widening as if in startled confusion. There was a quality about them as child-like as their shapes, appealing—and somehow not evil. It was a thing Bryan did not understand and which at the moment he had no time to

fathom.

He pressed his advantage, beating at the shapes with the jacket. It was as though he beat at phantoms. He could feel no contact with solidity through the cloth. And the mosquito-men seemed to realize their immunity, for abruptly they closed in, their sharp snouts thrusting at him. He twisted aside to evade one—but the second reached him before he could move again. Its needle-shaped organ speared his shoulder.

Bryan felt a brief pain, a sensation as though electricity had surged through him. Then a complete terrible numbness gripped his body. He could not move. He could still see, could still think, but his muscles were fettered by an overwhelming paralysis.

He could still think—but it was difficult. His mind seemed detached and vague, and somehow touched by a pulse of thought not his own. Alien rhythms beat in it, formless, confused. And then——

"Leeta! This one resisted! He did not fear us as did the others."

Child-like, piping, filled with excitement. And yet through the thought ran an undercurrent of wistful yearning, of trembling hope.

Then another thought: "Take him, Leeta! He is brave."

"Patience, little ones." Strangely soft and clear, this thought, ringing like delicate silver chimes.

At the edge of his field of vision, through eyes he could no longer control, Bryan saw movement—the

sweep and flutter of great wings. Then a slim figure moved into his sight, a figure in a simple draped garment, walking as lightly and gracefully as though on air.

Leeta, he knew. Wonder rose in him—and sudden fascination.

Spectre? Witch? He could not decide. His eyes told him that she was woman—a woman like few he had seen, slender yet softly rounded, dainty yet with a suggestion of strength. Her small features held an odd startling loveliness, elfin, somehow . . . *other-race*. Her eyes were tilted and strangely large, the nostrils of her tiny nose deeply indented and flaring, her chin pointed. Her gleaming black hair was long, thick, gently curling, a contrasting frame for flawless white skin.

She glowed luminously. And—he could see through her. Like the mosquito-men, like the giant bird, she was mistily transparent, inexplicably unsubstantial.

SHE stood before him, then. Her great liquid eyes gazed at him in wonder, with a searching curiosity. There was a tenseness and urgency about her, as though she were driven by some desperate all-important purpose. And there was an air of tragedy about her, a despair, a quality of wistful yearning like that Bryan had sensed in the child-like piping thoughts. The mystery of this woman caught at him, drew him.

Witch? Again he wondered. He

could find nothing evil in her face, nothing of cruelty or guile. Behind the compelling anxiety in her eyes, the sadness that touched her full lips, was . . . innocence.

The curiosity faded from her face. The tenseness and urgency that had been lurking in her abruptly became dominant.

Her hands lifted. Bryan saw now that she held an object in them, a globe of cloudy gray crystal, within which seemed to lay a core of pale rose light. And the light, he noticed, waxed and waned in a slow pulsing.

Bryan detected a sudden eagerness in the winged shapes that hovered beyond. And with the eagerness came the child-like piping.

"Take him, Leeta! He has courage. This time you may succeed."

An answering thought, soft, holding a delicate note. "Patience . . ."

Then Bryan saw the crystal globe being lifted still higher—toward his face. Behind it the girl's large exotic eyes seemed very intent. Within the globe the pulsing of the pale rose core quickened.

Bryan felt something draw at him. A strange force—like insistent hands. Hands immaterial and yet tangible, that reached into him . . . and pulled.

It was not a physical sensation. Nor was it purely mental. It was something that went beyond even this—something that gripped at the very foundation of being.

Bryan felt himself being drawn. And he did not understand. There

was a purpose here and a means he could not grasp.

He resisted.

In a moment the force left him.

The globe lowered. Over it the girl peered at him, startled, perplexed. And from the background came a piping despair.

"Failed . . . It has failed . . ."

"He has a strength I have not met before." An echo of that other despair lay in the silver chiming. And an overtone of awe. "He cannot be taken—and that is strange. He has qualities I cannot quite explain. But his will is great—great enough, I think, to penetrate the veil unaided."

"He cannot be taken . . ." The piping again, sorrowfully resigned.

Bryan was aware of the girl's eyes on him. The wistfulness in them seemed to have grown. And from some deep recess within him rose a sudden queer aching.

"Farewell. . . ."

Farewell? Protest surged in him. He struggled to make a detaining gesture—but it was futile. She turned away.

The hovering winged shapes followed her. Moving swiftly and lightly, she went toward the pavilion, before which the statuesque man stood beside the prone figure of the unconscious girl.

She lifted the globe to the man . . . its inner pulsing quickened. A radiance grew in it, as though some energy were being absorbed. The pulsing was very rapid now—tri-

umphant.

Then the girl turned, hurrying back to the giant bird, which was waiting nearby. Behind her, even as she turned, the man swayed—fell. He fell loosely, emptily, his eyes open.

The girl leaped to the bird's back. In another moment it sprang into the air, huge wings beating. Higher it lifted, and higher. The mosquito-men followed. All soared beyond Bryan's range of vision, and the beating of wings faded . . . died.

Slowly the paralysis left Bryan. He flexed his limbs stiffly. His muscles ached, as though from cramp.

He went over to the sprawled figures of the man and the girl, then. The man had the same terrible unresponsive limpness as the man Bryan had seen at the hospital. He was beyond any aid Bryan could give.

Bryan turned his attention to the girl in an effort to quicken her return to consciousness. Shortly her eyes opened—then flared with recollection. She glanced swiftly about her, fright twisting at her face.

In the next instant she saw her fallen escort and seemed to realize for the first time that Bryan was a stranger. She went quickly to the other man and lifted his head.

"Tom!" she cried. "Tom! What is the matter?" Horror grew in her voice. "Why don't you answer me?"

Empty eyes that looked sightlessly into the night. Slack gaping lips

that did not move.

The girl turned to Bryan with an expression of bewildered grief. "How . . . how did this terrible thing happen?"

Bryan hesitated. What he had experienced now seemed too wildly improbable to discuss. The very improbability of it could only add to the girl's suffering. And for a reason he did not fully understand he wanted to keep to himself the knowledge of that strangely lovely apparition whose name, it appeared, was Leeta.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know."

The girl's control seemed to break. She covered her face with her hands, convulsive sobs shaking her.

Bryan waited helplessly, with a feeling of guilt. In another moment, over the muffled sobbing, he heard the sound of approaching feet. A flashlight beam bobbed into view up one of the radiating walks, and presently Bryan was able to make out the blue-clad running figure of a patrolman.

"What's going on?" the patrolman demanded. "I heard a scream." He moved his flashlight beam from the girl and the prostrate man, to Bryan. He added in surprise, "You here, Terry?"

Bryan nodded a greeting, recognizing the other now as Pat Mulvaney, a park officer. "This man seems to be hurt, Pat. We'd better get him to a hospital."

Mulvaney bent over the sprawl-

ing figure, then returned to Bryan, speaking low-voiced. "Hurt ain't the word for it, Terry. This case is like the other ones we found in the park. And it would have to happen tonight. Olson was supposed to be on duty at this end, but he sprained an ankle. We're short-handed, what with the Department being on a budget."

With the girl tearfully following, Bryan and Mulvaney carried the stricken man to a call box, where Mulvaney telephoned his report and requested that an ambulance be sent. Bryan was asked to accompany the girl to headquarters, in a squad car, for questioning.

IT wasn't until shortly before dawn that Bryan reached his room and began undressing for bed. He examined his bare shoulder in a mirror. There was a reddish patch on the skin, the size of a half-dollar piece, where the sharp snout of the mosquito-man had pierced him. The mark convinced him further that the whole thing had been no mere hallucination.

He felt no pain—but his body seemed faintly, oddly feverish. And he had a light-headed feeling that could not have been entirely due to tiredness.

He took a stiff drink of whisky and crawled into bed. Sleep would not come at once. Confused thoughts revolved in his mind.

He saw himself at police headquarters, answering questions. The girl had told her story up to the

instant she had fainted, mentioning the flying shapes. She was unable to describe them, except to say the strangeness of their appearance had terrified her. Bryan was reluctant to discuss his own experience, but the girl had told of hearing his warning, and this placed him squarely on the scene. He could not claim ignorance of ensuing events without laying himself open to suspicion.

He had told of seeing the flying shapes also, but claimed he had been unable to make out details. They had moved too swiftly, his explanation went, it had been too dark. One had rushed at the man, knocking him down, then all had flown out of sight. A vague story — evasive. But the police had seemed satisfied, to the extent that the story checked with the girl's.

The flying shapes . . . Leeta . . . A curious excitement surged in him as he thought of the wraithlike girl. Who was she? Where had she come from?

He recalled something she had said—something about his will being strong enough to penetrate the veil unaided. It seemed important. But what had she meant by that? What—and where—was the veil?

And—how had he been able to understand her? He realized now that neither she nor the others had used audible speech, yet he had the impression of intelligible spoken words, of voice tones.

He pondered the mystery with a growing fogginess. He slept.

And then he was not sleeping.

He was standing on a mountain ridge, looking down into a broad green valley. It was daylight. In the sky hung a great red-tinged sun, which immediately struck him as—alien. But for the moment his wonder remained concentrated on the valley. There was something there that drew him — that had drawn him there. A bond of some sort existed, an indefinable ethereal linking, over which he had crossed like a bridge. A bond, he sensed, that even now was somehow fading . . . dissolving.

The valley was a pleasant place, idyllic. Peace and quiet were cupped within it. He had the sudden, insistent feeling that he had been seeking a place like this, a place where he could be happy, where his blind strivings would find fulfillment. A place—*where?*

He turned to gaze on the other side of the ridge. And saw — horror. The land here was a ghostly desolation, blackened, charred, lifeless, bathed in an eerie shimmering blue radiance. An unutterably deadly radiance, he knew in some strange way. And he knew, too, that the radiance lay everywhere — except in this lone valley.

He returned his attention to it with a mounting urgency. The scene was growing dim, blurring. It was escaping him. He made a frantic exertion of will, seeking in what few moments that remained an answer to a certain question.

There was . . . a shifting. The

ridge was gone. He stood within the valley, at the foot of a rocky slope, up which ran a curving stairway of a building of some pink stone. The building was exotic in design, terraced, domed, fairy-like. All around it strangely beautiful flowers and shrubs grew in riotous profusion. He had the nostalgic impression of heady fragrance and warm breeze, of serenity and peace. And he felt a queer ache of longing.

Then, breaking abruptly through the deep stillness, he seemed to hear a faint piping. He turned in search and saw a flagstone path through a lane of trees. At the end of the lane was movement, a flutter as of wings.

HE willed himself toward it. Again there was a shifting. And now he stood at the edge of a broad shallow depression, like a sunken garden. The path dipped down into this by a short stairway and ran on to circle what appeared to be a pool at the center. All around the pool flowers grew with an incredible luxuriance and splendor, thick masses of flowers, startling in their size and beauty, that made the air almost solid with their mingled perfume. It was as though they found some abnormally rich nourishment here that stimulated their fantastically prolific growth.

The very atmosphere of this place seemed charged with a vital energy. Bryan had a feeling of surging life, of boundless power. And he sensed that it came from the pool. Some-

thing more than water was contained within it, something strange, supernatural — godlike.

The pool was filled with a pearly opalescence, alive and seething with delicate pastel hues, swirling, changing. Sparkles of chromatic brilliance raced over its surface, blazing and vanishing. A glow rose from it like a gorgeous rainbow-colored mist, spreading, charging the air with vibrant energy.

But the weird magnificence of the pool held Bryan's attention only momentarily. For kneeling at its brink like a nymph in an enchanted setting was . . . Leeta. In a semicircle behind her a score or more of the grotesque mosquito-men made a fascinated audience. The giant bird, too, was visible, squatting, motionless.

In her hands the girl held the crystal globe, shining with its stolen radiance. Now she leaned forward, lowering the globe to the surface of the pool. It seemed to float, pulsing. Sparkles from the pool ran to it in a growing boil of motion — and were absorbed. The activity grew swifter and yet swifter, until the pool seethed and foamed with brilliance. The air turned electric with a sensation of vast striving, of super-human effort.

Watching puzzled, from his vantage point above the depression, Bryan saw the globe begin to swell. Its radiance blazed feverishly, its pulsing increased to a frenzied beat. Larger, it grew — larger. Became misty, unsubstantial, unreal. The

rose core of it grew also, elongating, paling to pink. And now it was taking shape — the shape of a man. Features began forming, and then —

Stunned amazement hit Bryan as he peered intently at the figure being so weirdly created. For recognition had come. He was looking at the man who, a short time before, had been attacked in the park by Leeta and her bizarre followers.

The shape was taking on solidity. Dazed, Bryan recalled the events in the park. Leeta's strange globe, he realized, had absorbed some vital essence from its victim — perhaps the soul — and this essence was now being released by the pool. Released, somehow, in a perfect replica of the fleshly covering that originally had housed it.

The man hung over the pool. His closed eyes fluttered, opened. Animation touched his face. Fear showed in it, a rising horror, a frantic desperation. He struggled.

And began dissolving.

The pool boiled and seethed as though in a mighty effort to hold its creation intact. It did not succeed. The shape thinned, shrunk, faded . . . was gone.

There was a moment of stricken stillness. The pool had quieted. Its aura of supernal power had dimmed. An air of exhaustion lay over it now, an exhaustion in which even the surrounding flowers seemed to pale and droop.

Then a piping murmur rose like a sigh of mourning. "Failed . . . again . . ."

And Leeta covered her face with her hands, sagging. Her bowed shoulders shook with great sobs of mingled grief, disappointment and despair.

Bryan wanted to make some sign of sympathy, of consolation — but again the scene was growing blurred, fading. He fought to hold it together, fought as the pool had fought . . . futilely. And then a hovering blackness rushed over him, and he seemed to whirl dizzily across an enormous gulf.

He awoke in bed, soaked with perspiration, breathing hard. He had a feeling of anger, dejection.

He swung his legs to the floor and glanced at his watch. He had been asleep for less than an hour, but at the moment he was too upset by his strangely realistic nightmare to return to bed.

He lit a cigarette and fell to pacing the length of his room. Thinking back over his disturbingly vivid dream, he wondered why he should have experienced it in that particular way. The events of the preceding night had been unnerving enough, but he felt there was a deeper reason. Was it possible that the queer wound he had received in the park had something to do with it? He recalled his feverishness, his light-headed sensation.

Then he thought of the man he had seen in the dream, and came to an abrupt stop. In another instant he sprang back into motion, hurrying to the telephone near the bed. He dialed the hospital to which the

man had been taken from the park, waiting impatiently while the doctor in charge of the case was put on.

Identifying himself, then, he asked quickly, "How is the fellow, doctor?"

"Afraid I have bad news. He died about five minutes ago. There didn't seem to be a single thing I could do to prevent it."

"I see" Bryan muttered his thanks and hung up. He sat staring into space.

Five minutes ago . . . That would be shortly before he had awakened — about the time the image of the man, in the dream, had dissolved and vanished . . .

That afternoon Bryan sat at a secluded corner table in the small restaurant he frequented near the *Courier* Building. The remains of a fourth cup of coffee stood before him, the saucer littered with cigarette butts. He was staring into the cup, brooding. His mind kept returning to his strange dream and its incredible implications. And tangled in the thread of his thoughts was the picture of Leeta, dainty and elfinly lovely, struggling toward an end he could only dimly grasp.

A slim figure dropped into the chair opposite Bryan. It was Joyce, crisp, fresh, giving her usual effect of elegance.

"Hi! A little bird told me I'd find you here, Terry." She studied his face in swift concern. "What on earth happened to you last night? You look like a fugitive from a

horror movie."

"Maybe I am," Bryan grunted. And he grinned wryly at the element of truth in his retort.

Joyce was solemn, probing. "Terry, I heard what happened in the park last night. One of our fellow wage slaves is posted at Headquarters, you know. And from what he told me, I gather you were mixed up in something with a spook angle. But, Terry, it seems the police have the quaint idea you didn't give them the whole story."

He shook his head. "I'm not ready for the booby-hatch just yet."

"Then you didn't tell the whole story." She leaned forward, her face eager. "I'm dying with curiosity over what really happened, Terry. Want to tell me — or are you saving it for your memoirs?"

He lighted a fresh cigarette, considering. Joyce was an understanding person, he knew. And she had imagination. She could be trusted not to misinterpret the fantastic nature of his experience.

Speaking low-voiced, he told her of Leeta's arrival at the park, of the attack on the other man and himself by the grotesque and somehow unsubstantial mosquito-men, of the complete paralysis that had resulted.

Joyce broke in, "But, Terry, if the things weren't solid, how could they possibly have affected you?"

"I've been trying to figure out that angle," he said. "I think they were energy projections of some kind and were able to use this energy to stun their victims. It should work

both ways — that is, some forms of energy from our end should be able to affect them, too."

He went on to describe the crystal globe and the use Leeta had made of it. Finally he mentioned his dream and his telephone call to the hospital.

Joyce looked shaken. "It . . . it's gruesome, Terry. If anyone else had told me those things, I'd have said they were plain crazy." She hesitated. "This girl with the strange way of making men friends, what was she like?"

"She was . . . beautiful," Bryan said. He stared into distance, seeing Leeta in memory again. His voice softened. "I've never met anyone like her."

"She's a witch!" Joyce said abruptly, an unnatural sharpness in her tone. "A vampire — a ghoul. What she's done is horrible, Terry. Someone should put a stop to her."

"She isn't a monster," Bryan returned in swift defense. "Not depraved or vicious. I don't quite understand it, but I feel there's a good reason for what she has been doing."

"She's a murderess, Terry!"

"According to our standards, yes. But I don't think she realizes she has been causing harm."

"That's generous of you," Joyce said. Her mockery held bitterness. "But your lady Bluebeard has to be kept from doing any more killing, Terry. Aren't you going to try to do something about it?"

He nodded grimly. "I'm going

to keep watching the park. If she shows up again — and I think she will — I'll make an attempt to talk to her, reason with her. I have an idea about how it can be done."

"That's fine, Terry. I'm glad I don't have to do anything drastic to make an honest man of you."

He stared at her. "What do you mean by that?"

"This is a serious business, Terry. Men have died — and more men might die. If you don't do something about it, then somebody else will have to." She reached for her purse and rose abruptly. "I'll be running along. See you around."

About to turn away, she paused and looked back at him. Her lips quivered, her hazel eyes held an odd swimming brightness. Then, before Bryan could overcome his bewilderment, she whirled and hurried toward the door.

He stared after her with a disturbing sense of alarm. He had always considered Joyce a friend, but not he realized her own feelings went deeper than that. Deep enough so that she seemed fiercely to resent his interest and sympathy where Leeta was concerned.

He felt — danger. Joyce, he knew now, had become an enemy.

He walked slowly through the darkness, a big man whose tweed suit was more rumpled than usual. The park was oddly deserted tonight. No couples strolled along the walks, no figures occupied the benches.

And Bryan knew the reason for that. Patrolmen, on emergency duty, guarded all the approaches to the park. People were being turned away. He himself had gained admission only because he was personally acquainted with the captain in charge of the guard detail. The only formality had been a warning to remain alert.

An expectant hush lay on the air. Even the warm spring breeze seemed stilled, the rustling of leaves muted. Bryan felt the atmosphere of tension, and his excitement grew. He wondered if Leeta would appear again, if he would be able somehow to attract her notice, speak to her.

Leeta He recalled the way she had looked when she had stood close to him, with the crystal globe in her hands — lovely, strange, wondering. He recalled the wistfulness that had radiated from her, the urgency. And in his mind seemed to ring an echo of the delicate silver chiming, voice-like, that seemed associated with her.

He couldn't deny his longing.

The pavilion took shape in the lamp-lit gloom. Bryan was walking toward it, when a burly figure stepped out of a patch of shadow a few yards ahead.

"Hold it, mister! Nobody's allowed in the park tonight."

Bryan chuckled, recognizing Pat Mulvaney. "Take it easy, Pat."

"Oh, it's you, Terry." Mulvaney strode forward. "How did you get in this time — sneak past the men we have around the front of the

park?"

"Miller passed me through," Bryan explained. He and the patrolman spent several minutes discussing what had happened the previous night. Bryan revealed nothing more than he had already told the police, but he mentioned the death of the man he had seen attacked.

Mulvaney was grim. "Think anything will happen tonight, Terry?"

"There's a good chance it will."

"Well, I'll be ready for it." Mulvaney slapped his holstered gun. He left, then, to continue his patrol of the area around the pavilion.

Bryan sat down on a bench and lighted a cigarette. An uneasy thought had risen in his mind. He didn't know if Mulvaney would be able to cause any real harm in the event that Leeta appeared, but he didn't want the girl hurt.

Time passed with tortuous slowness. The tense hush that lay over the park seemed to deepen. Bryan spoke to Mulvaney when the patrolman reached him on his rounds, but otherwise the monotony of the wait remained unbroken.

Bryan was fighting off a growing sleepiness, when at last he heard the sound he had been alternately hoping and dreading would come — the sound of wings. He saw the flying shapes, then, low against the star-studded sky, beginning their descent toward the pavilion. The structure seemed to be a favorite landmark, perhaps because it was situated in a

comparatively remote location and was easy to find in the darkness.

Mulvaney seemed to have heard the approaching sounds also. He came running from some point on the opposite side of the pavilion, cutting through the columned structure itself as he returned to Bryan. His burly figure appeared on the pavilion steps — and then halted in amazed surprise as he caught sight of the eerily glowing shapes that were now winging downward.

Eagerness had pulled Bryan to his feet. The soaring figures were rapidly coming closer, growing more distinct. He saw the giant bird and its escort of mosquito-men. He saw Leeta, slender-limbed, elfin, her gossamer draperies fluttering behind her.

The appearance of Mulvaney momentarily tore his attention from the scene. He realized that the patrolman was silhouetted against the pavilion's pale backdrop — a clear target. Leeta and the others would be drawn to him, unaware this time that possible great danger impended.

Anxiety hammering within him, Bryan launched himself into a headlong run toward Mulvaney. Already two of the mosquito-men were pulling ahead of the others, skimming directly at the patrolman.

Mulvaney seemed to overcome the shock produced by his first sight of the approaching shapes. He reached swiftly for his gun, raised it in deliberate aim — fired. There was a burst of luminous brightness.

One of the two onrushing child-like winged figures was abruptly gone — gone as swiftly and completely as though it had never been visible.

Bryan stumbled in his frantic stride, caught himself, numbed by a sudden dismay. Leeta and her people could be hurt! It was as though the glowing energy of which they seemed composed existed in a state of delicate balance that could be disrupted by the impact of a bullet or its shock-wave.

He reached the pavilion steps, leaped up them toward Mulvaney. He had to keep the man from firing again. Somehow he had to show Leeta that his intentions were friendly, sympathetic. He had to talk to her, make her realize what she had been doing. Perhaps, even, he could help her.

Mulvaney's blue-clad body loomed up before him. He caught desperately at the patrolman's arm.

"Wait!" he gasped. "Don't shoot!"

"Are you out of your mind?" the other cried. "Let go of me!"

They struggled. Bryan's foot slipped on the steps . . . he fell.

The mosquito-men seemed disconcerted by the loss of one of their band. They swerved away, as though in sudden terrified realization of danger. But the great bird, with Leeta astride its back, continued toward the ground a short distance from the pavilion, its huge size evidently preventing swift evasive action.

Leeta was almost in point-blank

range. And again Mulvaney was lifting his gun.

On hands and knees, Bryan threw himself back at the other. He caught Mulvaney about the legs, pulled. The patrolman went down, his gun blasting harmlessly into the air.

Bryan was climbing back to his feet, when he saw the luminous child-like shape of a mosquito-man darting at him, its needle-snout spearing toward his chest. He sought to twist aside — too late. He felt the brief pain, the electric sensation, and then paralysis held him in its rigid grip.

A second of the mosquito-men dove at Mulvaney as he, too, struggled erect, its needle-snout piercing his back. Mulvaney remained bent-over, frozen, statue-like.

There was an odd hiatus, poignant, holding a realization of hopes lost forever. Then a slim pale figure moved into Bryan's line of sight — Leeta. She approached to stand before him, holding the crystal globe, a vast wonder in her small face. He felt a pulse of thought, soft and clear, holding a ring of silver chimes.

"It is you — he whose will cannot be overcome. Strange that we should meet again . . . stranger still that you should save my life. I do not understand . . . But I am grateful. And I wish — "

The silver melody broke as though against some cold unyielding wall. Then it came again, sad, despairing.

"But what I wish cannot be, man of the mighty will. For you would not willingly journey through the veil. You are bound to this aspect of existence, as all the others were bound. But somewhere must be one who is not . . . And so my quest must go on. Again — farewell . . ."

Once more she was slipping from him. And once more he could do nothing. Despite his frantic, violent inner struggle, he could make no sound or movement, could give no slightest indication of the purpose that drove him. He was imprisoned within a cage of flesh as unresponsive and immovable as stone.

She turned to Mulvaney . . . held the crystal globe to him. Its pulsing quickened, it brightened. And Mulvaney fell, limp—empty.

Watching through his despair, Bryan saw Leeta stand hesitating. Slowly she glanced at him, as if somehow, throughout the weird proceedings, he had been at the back of her mind. Her small face seemed to hold a reluctance, a regret.

Then she turned and moved beyond his sight. And presently he heard the flapping of wings, drawing away, fading. Stillness closed over the park again.

Bryan felt the paralysis draining from him, more swiftly this time. It was as though his body had adjusted to it since the first attack.

He was straightening awkwardly, painfully, when he heard a sudden

faint rustling of branches, followed by the sound of light running feet. A figure appeared in the open space before the pavilion, hurrying toward him. The figure of a girl. And then he recognized her. Joyce!

He felt a sharp surprise . . . an unease. What was Joyce doing in the park?

"I saw what happened," she gasped breathlessly as he came up. Her face looked pale and strained. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. "Just getting back to normal."

She bent to make a brief, repelled examination of Mulvaney. "Can't something be done for this man?"

"There isn't any hope for him," Bryan returned. "He's in the same condition as the others." He studied Joyce for a moment, realizing that she was oddly changed—somehow deliberate, hostile. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see what your girlfriend looked like, Terry. I sneaked past the police in front of the park." Her voice took on a sudden accusing edge. "I saw what that half-naked witch did to this policeman. And you helped her, Terry. I saw you knock him down so he couldn't shoot her. It was murder, Terry—murder! He isn't dead yet, but you know he's going to be."

"I had to stop him," Bryan protested. "The girl deserved more of a chance than she was getting. I told you she really didn't know she was doing wrong. I thought I could reason with her, keep her from do-

ing any more harm—but things happened too fast."

Joyce shook her head coldly. "It's still murder. And you're in it up to your eyebrows, Terry. If the police find out what happened here, they'll lock you up and throw away the key."

In another moment her features softened, her voice grew pleading. "It isn't too late, Terry. Forget that girl. Tip off the police so they'll be ready for her the next time she shows up. They don't have to know exactly what you saw—or what you did. We'll keep that to ourselves, Terry. We'll start over again . . . you and I."

BRYAN stared at her, shocked by the bargain she was suggesting. She was asking him to doom Leeta, to sacrifice his pride and his hopes in return for her silence. It was a kind of blackmail, in which she was seeking to use the tragedy of Mulvaney for her own purposes. He found in this a wrong somehow vastly greater than in what Leeta had done—for this was knowing, calculating.

He had always regarded Joyce as a friend, understanding and sympathetic. Now he realized these qualities were only a veneer, and in the stress of what had happened the veneer had been stripped away. An underlying ugliness was revealed—an ugliness that seemed to be the very foundation of a world he had come to despise.

Slowly, grimly, he shook his head.

"You're asking too much for what you have to sell, Joyce. If I have to pick between you and Leeta, then . . ."

She stiffened as though struck. "Leeta!" she spat. "So you know her name, do you? Now I see you must have been cozy with her all along—that's why you helped her commit murder!"

Her voice grew shrill and breathless with fury. "All right, Terry! You're asking for it. I've made a fool of myself in front of everyone, chasing after you, throwing myself at you. This is where I even up the score. . . . The police might not believe what I just saw, but I'll tell them a story they'll swallow without tasting. They just love people who help kill cops. And they already have a crush on you over the run-around you gave them after the last killing. If you aren't sent to the chair, you're dead certain to get a job cracking shells in a nut-house. Everybody knows you've been going to pieces, and they won't be surprised to hear you've finally blown your top."

She stood facing him a moment longer, her eyes blazing with deadly promise. Then she whirled and was running swiftly toward one of the paths that led away from the pavilion.

Bryan gazed after her, realizing that he might have made a serious mistake. But he was somehow unable to care. He had an enormous sense of futility, defeat. All his hopes, the very course of his life,

had come to center about this evening's meeting with Leeta — and she had slipped from him. There would not be another chance. Joyce had made it clear that the sands of time were running out for him.

He glanced down at the prone figure of Mulvaney, hesitated. It seemed callous to leave the patrolman like this. But there was nothing that could be done for Mulvaney now. Except, perhaps, to answer the questions of the police about what had happened to him. And Bryan didn't feel like answering questions. He'd had little sleep that morning, and exhaustion made his body leaden. And he had the feverish, light-headed feeling again, the aftermath of his paralysis.

He turned aimlessly and walked down one of the paths, until he found himself at the edge of an invitingly dark grassy expanse. He dropped to the ground behind some tall bushes and closed his eyes. He seemed to be floating in a lightless, depthless sea. Soothing waves of sensation washed over him. He drifted away on warm tides that held nothing of sound or feeling.

AND then the nothingness was gone. He stood on a flagstone path that ran between a lane of trees. At one end the path led to a curving stairway that wound up a rocky slope to a building of pink stone. Peace and quiet lay over the scene, like a crystal blanket of supernal clarity.

Realization came to him, bring-

ing with it an electrifying amazement. He was back—back in that strange and exotically beautiful other-place which seemed to be Leeta's home!

Leeta! Eagerness and wild joy flamed in him, then. There was still a chance. It was not hopeless after all—not too late. . . .

His senses rushed toward the other end of the path, and now he detected a muted piping, like the shrill whispers of excited children. He sent himself toward it.

The familiar shifting again. He stood at the edge of the broad shallow depression he had seen before, with the pool of inexplicable force at its center. The flowers that crowded here were as incredibly luxuriant and gorgeous as he remembered them, filling the air with their thick perfume. And once more he felt the aura of vital power that radiated from the pool, boundless, awesome, god-like.

And kneeling beside the pool as before was the slender figure he was seeking—Leeta. Only dimly was he aware of the other shapes around her, the giant bird, the mosquito-men. She was holding the mystically shining crystal globe, even now she was bending to lower it to the surface of the pool.

Into his mind flashed the chilling picture of Mulvaney, horribly sprawled, motionless—empty. He knew he had to prevent what was about to take place.

Urgency leaping in him, he sent himself toward the pool. Leeta had

to see him this time! He threw all his will into the thought in a mighty burst of effort. She had to see him!

And she saw him.

With the globe extended in her hands, she stiffened. Her tilted liquid eyes flared wide. A stark unbelieving amazement seemed to grip her slim body. And in a fashion that was somehow a normal function of his senses here, he realized that she saw him as he had seen her back at the park, mistily unsubstantial, weirdly glowing.

"You!" she said at last. The silvery chime of her thought held the quality of a gasp.

Her stunned incredulity was echoed by the other presences before the pool.

"He is the strange one — he is here!"

"He of the great will has come!"

Then the silvery chiming again, stronger now. "You followed me here, man of the other aspect? Were you able so easily to penetrate the veil?"

"I don't know just how I got here," Bryan returned. "But I do know that this is where I wanted to be."

She seemed to grasp the implications of the thought, for a sudden delight stirred in her. Yet for the moment her wonder remained dominant. "I do not understand how this can be. The others could not penetrate the veil without the aid of the Vessel. It is as though they were somehow bound to their

aspect of existence—bound as you, man of the mighty will, are not. . . . But why have you come?"

His answer was grave, deliberate. "Partly to ask you to stop the harm you have been causing in my world, Leeta."

"Harm?" A silvery peal of shock burst from her. "I . . . I do not understand."

"You took something from those men in my world, Leeta—something they could not live without. And because of this, they died."

"Died! But the pool could not incarnate them into this aspect. The vital force escaped. I thought it returned to its shell in the other aspect."

Bryan clearly understood the meaning behind the terms she used. He shook his head. "The vital force did not return—not once, Leeta. The shells died."

She looked stricken. "I had not thought that happened when the vital force escaped. I had been certain that it returned through the veil, drawn back by its bonds with the shell. . . . If it did not return, then it must have perished here." The realization was one she found startling, dismaying.

Bryan nodded slowly. "It perished in this aspect, just as the energy projection of one of your winged creatures perished in mine. For I assume that the creature did perish, Leeta."

"Yes," she whispered. "It was a thing I did not understand. But now. . . ." Her thought faded un-

happily. Sorrow misted her eyes.

HE dropped down beside her at the edge of the pool. For the moment, driven by his intense purpose, he forgot that he was somehow immaterial, a projection. He forgot the strangeness of that bizarre other-world garden and the tensely watching shapes nearby. There was only Leeta and himself. That was all that mattered.

Earnestness heavily underscored his thought. "Leeta, you must stop what you have been doing. You know now it has caused the deaths of those men in my world. And there is another reason, Leeta—danger. My people will be watching for you to appear again. They will try to destroy you."

She shook her head with a mournful determination. "But I cannot stop. I have a duty to fulfill that is greater than any harm I might cause—greater even than my own life."

"What do you mean, Leeta? What is this duty?"

"I shall tell you. But first—you have seen something of this valley? You have seen that it is beautiful?"

"Very beautiful, Leeta."

"But only the valley is like that. All the rest of my world is bathed in a terrible fire that destroys any life it touches."

"I have seen that, too," he said. "Was it always this way?"

"Not always. Once the entire world was like the valley, beauti-

ful, filled with life. There were fully as many people as on your own world. And they had great knowledge—too much knowledge, perhaps. They lived in vast cities and had many wonderful machines to serve them. They could have been happy, could have climbed to even greater heights—but there was war.”

The silver chiming was dulled by sadness, and a kind of instinctive horror. “It was a war fought with weapons of frightful, magic power—weapons that used the very secrets of existence itself. Life of all forms was wiped out, except in this valley. For a small group of people had guessed what the war would do and had taken refuge here. The valley, you see, was unique, not only well isolated from any possibility of attack, but shielded on all sides by mountains which contained an element capable of resisting the fire. Thus, while the fire spread like a deadly blight into other refuges, it did not reach here. Not entirely.”

Bryan felt an awed wonder at the picture Leeta had drawn. Behind her chiming thought images had moved—images that seemed to hold a tantalizing familiarity. He had been puzzling over the location of Leeta’s world, and now he speculated startledly whether it wasn’t Earth itself. He recalled that she had spoken of their individual worlds as aspects, as though they were different views of the same place rather than completely different and unrelated places.

The possibility was supported by the fact that Leeta was undeniably human. Further, he knew that the consuming fire she described was radioactivity—and the people of his world were already well along in their knowledge of atomic weapons. His wonder sharpened. Was Leeta’s world actually Earth—an Earth of the distant future? Was the veil that separated them time itself?

SHE appeared not to have noticed his fleeting thoughts. It was as though her awareness was gripped by the tragedy of what she had been describing.

Slowly she went on, “The fire’s terrible breath touched the valley, and its effects were felt by the creatures who had sought shelter here—both human and animal. Some died, some . . . changed. The winged ones you see around you now are the results of that change. Even the flowers and trees became different. And the pool was created. The fire touched something in this particular spot—and the pool came into being. The process was never understood, but I do know that the pool has strange powers—that somehow it is alive . . . intelligent. It is the pool which made possible what I have done, supplying the knowledge, tools and forces that were necessary.”

“But how does it happen that you’re the only person left in the valley?” Bryan asked.

She moved her slim, gleaming shoulders. “There were not many

here even in the beginning, while the fire was still at its height. After its destroying breath left the valley, only a very few were left—those, that is, who were still human. And they somehow did not care to live. My father was the last to die, but before he did he said I must find a way to keep our race from perishing with me. He explained that I was the first human truly adjusted to the changed conditions of the valley, and only in me was there hope.

"That was . . . and remains . . . my duty—to keep humans alive in this aspect. The answer to my problem lay beyond the veil. Matter was held by the energy field of the aspect in which it was situated, and thus could not be made to cross without the use of enormous power. But the vital force contained in living matter could be made to cross easily enough—with, of course, the means of a tool like the Vessel. And the pool could incarnate the vital force, give it matter in this aspect according to the pattern of the original shell. All I had to do was bring the vital force of a man through the veil—and my race could go on. Still, I have been unsuccessful, for it seems that the vital force is also held to its aspect."

"I think that's because of what might be called psychic bonds," Bryan said slowly. "The men you brought here, Leeta—they did not want to come. And once here they did not want to stay. That, it seems, is why you've failed."

He indicated the globe she was holding. "And that's why you'll fail again. It's wrong to destroy a life uselessly, Leeta. Wrong. Surely you realize that. You must release this man—if it's at all possible."

"It can be done," she said. Then her thought grew protesting, rebellious. "But I cannot release him. I cannot give up my mission so easily. I must keep trying until I succeed. Surely you in turn must realize how great my duty is."

"Will you persist in it even if you know you are doing wrong, bringing pain and grief to people in my aspect? Don't you know what grief is, Leeta? Didn't you feel grief when your father died—when that winged creature of yours died?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly. "Yes."

"And don't you know what love is? Haven't you realized that you were tearing those men away from persons they loved deeply and didn't want to leave? I don't mean the kind of love you felt for your father, Leeta, but the love that exists between a man and a woman who are mated. Don't you know what that kind of love is like?"

SHE hesitated, startled, wondering. "No," she breathed at last.

"Then I'll show you," he said. Though he was somehow unsubstantial, a projection, he knew he could still transmit feeling, just as the mosquito-men had transmitted their paralysis to him. He bent toward

her, pressed his lips to hers. He felt her surprise — and then her pleasure, her shy response. There was somehow a sweetness in that kiss, an intensity, that moved him as no kiss had ever done.

Finally he drew away. "That is love, Leeta—something that would bring a man willingly to your aspect."

Her small face was flushed, her liquid eyes shone. Then despair washed over her. "But if you don't —" She gestured helplessly. "Where would I find a man in whom there would be such a love?"

He looked at her intently, searchingly, then gestured at the globe. "Leeta, if I were willing to stay here with you, would you release this man?"

"For you—yes." In her was no guile, only an innocent directness. "I have thought of you from the first moment we met," she admitted. "I found qualities in you that were not present in any of the others—a strength, and yet a gentleness, a sadness. I could not forget . . . and I know now that this was love. And if you will truly stay—" She broke off eagerly. "Watch!"

She extended the globe toward the pool. She did not lower it, but held it over the surface. Her slim body grew very still. She seemed to be concentrating . . . communing.

And as he watched, Bryan saw the mists from the pool thicken around the globe. The supernal power that radiated from it took on

an atmosphere of tension, strain. For an instant, even though he still saw her, he had the uncanny yet definite impression that the globe was—gone.

Abruptly, then, dismayingly, the scene dimmed, began fading, as it had done on his first visit. Panic swept him. He couldn't leave now—he didn't want to leave! He fought to keep the garden around him, summoning all the force of will of which he was capable.

The scene steadied—but remained oddly blurred. He saw now that Leeta had turned from the pool and was holding out the globe to him, smiling. The globe's mystic brightness was gone. Once more it was a cloudy gray, its core a faint rose, slowly pulsing.

"It is done," Leeta said. "He has been returned safely to the other aspect." Then her smile vanished. She stared at Bryan in swift concern. "Why, what is the matter? What has happened to you?"

Her questions seemed to come from a great distance. The scene was dissolving again—and this time he could not hold it together. Something was wrong, he knew, seriously wrong. He tried to send a last message to Leeta . . . failed.

Darkness closed around him. And from a distance even greater than before, he sensed an anguished chiming, stunned, broken.

"A trick! It was just a trick!"

SOMEONE was shaking his shoulder roughly and insistently. He

strained away in dull protest, groping blindly for the fragile ethereal thread that had slipped from him.

"Come on, snap out of it!" an impatient voice growled.

He forced open his eyes, then squeezed them shut again as the beam of a flashlight struck them. His awareness sharpened. He struggled to sit up, felt grass under his fingers, and realized abruptly that he was back in the park.

Hands that were not gentle caught him under his armpits and helped raise him to his feet. He saw the figures of two men now, one of them in police uniform. This man held a gun, its muzzle pointed in silent threat.

"All right, cop-killer," the man in the suit said. He had a detective's unemotional face and flat hard eyes. Something bright glinted in his hands as he leaned close—and Bryan felt the cold steel of handcuffs close around his wrists.

"Let's go," the detective said, then. "We've got about two-dozen men combing the park for you, friend. They won't like to be kept on the job for nothing. Pete and I were just lucky enough to get to you first."

Rough hands gripped Bryan's arms, pulled him into motion. He walked leadenly, unsteadily, the two men flanking him. His body was clammy with the perspiration that had bathed him in sleep. He felt exhausted, weak, as though from some tremendous labor. The energy of his body, it seemed, had

been heavily drawn upon in order to sustain the projection of himself in Leeta's aspect.

Leeta. . . . He thought of her with a crushing sense of tragedy. He knew he loved her—incredible and weird as that love may have seemed. He remembered the shyness of her kiss, the numbed horror of her belief that she had been betrayed, that he had pretended love only as a ruse to obtain Mulvaney's freedom. If only he were able to reassure her—

But he had the chill certainty that he would never see her again. For she had learned the meaning of pain.

Despair rose in him, a despair that submerged even his concern over the situation in which he now found himself. *Cop-killer*. . . . The implications brought a kind of remote wonder. Joyce, it appeared, had made her threat good. She had told the police a story that they had swallowed without tasting. It was a story that had resulted in a swift and thorough search of the park, a story that had required handcuffs and drawn guns.

Bryan glanced at the detective beside him. "You boys taking me in because of what happened to Mulvaney?"

"Mostly because of Mulvaney," the other grunted. "We don't know what you did to him, friend—but you're going to tell us about it. In the back room at Headquarters. You're damned well going to tell us all about it."

"Mulvaney isn't dead," Bryan insisted.

"Not yet. But he's going to kick off sooner or later—just like the others. I know about that, friend."

Bryan shook his head. "Mulvaney isn't going to die."

"That so?" The detective's flat gaze studied him without surprise or interest. "But the other guys did—four of them. Don't forget that."

Bryan fell silent. Mulvaney wouldn't die—but he would tell of Bryan knocking him down, of Bryan's co-operation with strange creatures that had taken the lives of four men. Mulvaney, however, wasn't likely to tell exactly what he had seen. His story, too, would be something that could be swallowed without tasting. . . .

Then Bryan saw that he and the others were crossing one edge of an open space. The pavilion rose in the middle of it, a pale ghostly shape against the darkness. It would remain a symbol for him. For within sight of it his life had begun—and ended.

A path swallowed him and his captors. The pavilion faded from view. Ahead was the sprawling bulk of the city, dotted and splashed with light.

It was against this backdrop that the sound came, rising out of inaudibility. The flapping of great wings.

Wings!

A vast wind seemed to blow

through Bryan. He stopped dead, staring up into the sky.

The detective and his companion seemed to hear the sound also. They, too, peered upward, puzzled.

Bryan thought he knew where to look. And glancing back in the direction of the pavilion, he saw a vague dark shape against the stars. Sudden urgency roared in him like thunder.

The pavilion! He had to go back!

He lifted his imprisoned arms and swung them in a sweeping club-like blow. The policeman dropped before he could move his gun back into line. The detective swore in dismay, sent a hand darting under his coat—but Bryan was already whirling toward him. He kneeled the man in the stomach, then felled him with a chopping blow to the back of the head.

Beyond hindrance now, Bryan ran. He ran recklessly, wildly, eagerness driving away his exhaustion, sending an explosive power into his legs.

Behind him voices shouted, a whistle shrilled. Then the sharp blast of a gun split the air.

He left the path and cut across a stretch of grass. A wall of shrubbery rose before him, and he plunged into it without checking speed. Branches lashed at him, tore at him. He fell, heaved himself erect, fought his way clear.

More grass, and then another path, running parallel to the one he had fled. He followed this, and

presently the pavilion took form in the gloom. Above it a dark shape circled on huge wings. The giant bird—and it was alone. Bryan could see no other shapes accompanying it.

He was puzzling over the discovery, when a flashlight beam speared at him out of an intersecting path. Shouts followed it, filled with a swift excitement.

"There he is!"

"Stop, you!"

Bryan plunged on. Again a whistle shrilled. Then the running sounds of a group of men came in pursuit.

The pavilion rose before him. He reached the open space around it, halted, swung his bound hands in an urgent gesture at the sky.

"Here I am!" he called, not knowing if his call would be heard. "Here—quick!"

If it did not actually hear him, the giant bird saw him. Swiftly it descended. And as it dropped toward him, he saw it held an object in its beak—the crystal globe. His perplexity mounted. For added to all the other strangeness of this event, he now detected a desperation about the bird, a consuming anxiety.

He sent his thought to meet the pulse that was reaching toward him. "Where is Leeta? Has something happened?"

With a final sweep of its wings, the bird settled to the ground. Its answer came, then, holding an odd deep twittering quality.

"The fire! Leeta is sending herself into the fire! Only you can stop her. She has commanded the winged ones not to interfere — a command we cannot disobey."

"Leeta—planning to destroy herself? But why?"

"It is because of this thing called love that you awoke in her. She felt that without you there was no longer any reason to live." Anxiety sharpened in the twittering thought. "Will you help to save Leeta, man of this aspect? Will you come with me through the veil?"

"Yes," Bryan said. "Yes!" Eagerly he leaned close to the slowly pulsing globe that the bird held out to him in its beak . . . felt himself drawn as though by immaterial hands that reached deep within him.

From an increasing distance sounds came to him, the pounding of feet, shouts, the roar of a gun. Something struck his shoulder, but only dimly was he aware of it. The last physical bonds were parting.

And then a pulsing darkness enclosed him.

THROUGH the darkness came light, a flicker of motion and a flash of color, like the beating wings of a butterfly. The light grew, the darkness vanished. He floated in a gorgeous rainbow-hued brilliance that shimmered and swirled with the throb of a supernal laboring. Beyond the brilliance outlines were taking form. He had a sensation of swift movement — and found himself standing at the

edge of the pool in that bizarrely beautiful other-world garden he remembered so well.

"Haste! Haste!"

"Leeta is going into the fire!"

All around him the thoughts rose, beating at him. He saw the giant bird, then, and the smaller winged shapes that hovered beyond.

"Haste! Haste!"

The dread anxiety communicated itself to him, kindled a swift purpose. Sensing what was required of him, he hurried toward the waiting bird, leaped to its back. It sprang skyward, its huge wings beating. The garden dropped away, became a mere patch of bright color against the mottled pattern of the valley floor.

"Haste! Haste!"

Swifter and swifter the huge wings beat. Bryan clutched at the feathers under him, rocked by the surges of giant muscles, buffeted by the torrent of air that rushed past.

The valley wall rose ahead, and through a deep cleft in the towering masses of rock he saw a deadly blue shimmer. The bird descended toward the cleft—and abruptly he felt its stunned dismay.

"Leeta has gone through the portal! She has reached the fire!"

Anguish flamed in Bryan. He had done this. If Leeta died, it would be as though he had killed her with his own hands.

"Hurry!" he pleaded. "It may not be too late."

The bird dropped to the rocky ground at the entrance to the cleft.

Sliding from its back, Bryan ran through the opening, to the brink of that ghastly desolation he had seen once before. He glanced around in frantic search—and then, below him, he caught sight of a slender white figure moving through the shimmering blue radiance that blanketed the desolate landscape.

Too late! Leeta had entered the fire. For a moment the horrible realization held him rigid, dazed, numbed beyond thought. Then, a bleak purpose filling him, he hurried after her down a twisting rocky descent. He might not be able to save Leeta now—but he could die with her.

The blue radiance rose around him, and he felt its lethal touch. Leeta was some distance ahead of him, mistily unreal behind the shimmering curtain. And even as he found her, he saw her stumble, fall. She did not move again.

With an inner desolation even greater than that of the scene itself, he made his way over to the girl across the charred, tumbled floor. Gently he lifted her, carried her back to the cleft. His steps were leaden, faltering. A burning sensation was spreading through his body. Outlines were blurring before his eyes, darkening. He forced himself on.

It was not until he emerged through the cleft, not until he lowered Leeta to the ground, that he gave his ravaged body the oblivion it had been demanding.

Oblivion—and yet. . . . In some

dim, remote fashion he had a picture of the great bird, hovering over Leeta and himself on beating wings, grasping them carefully in its claws, carrying them through the air over the valley, and then descending with them toward the pool.

Down . . . down . . . And then a swirling brilliance, a sense of delicious coolness, of returning strength. He found himself floating in the pool. And besides him, her liquid eyes even now widening with returning awareness, was Leeta. He felt the god-like power of the pool throbbing through him, and he knew that he and Leeta had been cleansed of the deadly radiation, that life and not death now lay before them. And the knowledge was a music within him that swelled into a mighty paean of exultation.

Then he stood with Leeta at the edge of the pool, and she was staring at him in wild disbelief. The silvery chiming of her thought held

a vast wonder.

"Is it really you? Have you returned—through the veil? Or is this somehow only a dream?"

He shook his head gently, smiling. "Not a dream, Leeta. I've come back—and through the veil. Back to stay."

Joy was a sudden brimming brightness in her eyes. "Then the love of which you told me—it was not just a trick?"

"No—and I'm going to prove it, Leeta." He drew her to him . . . and knew, in the answering pressure of her lips, that he had convinced her.

He felt a deep content. Here was the world of his own that he had sought, and life had a meaning, a purpose it had lacked. Together he and Leeta would create a new race, as two others long before them had done, who had come from a place called Eden. . . .

THE END

EVERYTHING MOVES!

IT'S an increasingly apparent phenomenon of modern life that nothing is fixed, that everything is in motion. This is as true of inanimate things as it is of citizens!

Nowadays industry can mount anything—on four wheels—or fifty wheels—and move it. The art of transportation has reached the stage where a truck chassis can be used to convey anything from diapers to complete oil-well drilling outfits! Trucks are used to move homes, replace rail lines, shift industrial structures—you name it—they can do it.

The enormous increase in earth-

moving machinery is a consequence of this new transportation technique. Literally, mountains can be moved. And the physical structure doesn't exist which is locked to its position.

All this is a harbinger of the future. Instead of concentration in cities as has been happening all over the world for the last few centuries, it is possible for a civilization to spread itself out all over the country and still produce as effectively as if it were in one spot. Witness our own country which practically rolls no matter what it's doing or where it's going. Wheels!

WIND IN HER HAIR

By Kris Neville

To Marte and Johnny Nine the space ship was their world. And yet they dreamed of returning home to Earth . . . a planet they had never seen.



"MARTE!"
His voice echoed hollowly, dying away to an eerie whisper, fainter and fainter.

"Marte!"

It was very silent here on the last level below the giant atomic motors.

The feeble light showered down from a single overhead bulb; it was their special bulb. Marte always lit it when she came below.

"Marte!" His voice was almost pleading.

"Here I am, Johnny. Over here."

"Little imp," he said, not unkindly. "What do you mean, hiding?"

"Hiding, Johnny? I wasn't hiding . . . And besides, you looked so funny and lost, standing there, calling me."

He saw her, now, sitting half in shadow, leaning against the far bulkhead.



They envisioned themselves running hand in hand, with the wind whispering gently . . .

His feet ping-pinged on the uncarpeted deck plates as he crossed to her.

"Hello," she said brightly. She threw back her head, and her eyes caught the dim light and sparkled it. "I hoped you'd come today." Smiling, she held out her hand.

He took it. "I really shouldn't have," he said.

"Oh?" She puckered her lips in

mock anger and drew him down beside her. "Didn't you *want* to come?"

"You know I did."

"Then why?"

"They might need me in Control," he said, half seriously.

Marte's eyes opened an involuntary fraction. "Nothing's wrong, is there?" Her lips had lost their sudden, native smile, and the smile in her eyes half fled.

"No. Everything's fine . . . I just meant in case . . ."

"Oh, Johnny, don't say it; please." Her eyes spoke with her voice, emotions bubbled in them. Her face had something of a woman's seriousness in it, the product more of native understanding than experience, and much of a girl's naivete. "Don't even *think* about anything like that." She looked up at him, studied his face intently, and then said, "Tell me that: Say nothing's going to go wrong."

"I was just talking, Marte. Nothing can go wrong; not now."

"Say it again!"

"Nothing is going to go wrong," he said slowly, giving each word its full meaning.

"Do you really—really and *truly*—believe that?" she asked.

"Of course I do, Marte."

The girl smiled. "I do too—only—" The smile faded. Her eyes focused on some distant place, beyond the last level, beyond the Ship itself. "Only sometimes I'm afraid it's too good to happen . . . That I'm dreaming, and that all at once I'll wake up, and—" She shook her head. "But that's silly, isn't it, Johnny?"

"Yes," he said. He settled back and rested against the bulkhead.

THERE was silence for a while, two young people, hand in hand, sitting in silence.

Finally, Marte spoke.

"Here," she said, "feel." She pressed his hand against the bulkhead. "See how cool it is?"

"Of course. It's the outside plate."

"Yes," she said, "I know. There's nothing but space out there." She squeezed his hand. "But just a little while ago, before you came, I was sitting here thinking. And I thought that wind must feel like that. I mean, not how it *feels*, exactly, but how it makes *you* feel. Wild and free. Without any bulkheads to keep you from walking and walking."

He shook his head. "Little dreamer," he whispered.

She frowned prettily. "Don't you feel it, too?"

Johnny Nine pressed his hand to the bulkhead again. "Yes, I guess maybe I do. In a way."

"Of course you do! You've just got to. You can't *help* it! Put your cheek close against the bulkhead and you can almost feel the wind blowing on your face. I can. And if I try hard enough, I can almost smell the fields of flowers all in bloom and hear birds singing, like they were singing from far away . . . And I can—"

"You've been reading again," he interrupted with a smile.

"Uh-huh," she said dreamily. "I have . . . And when I finished, I came down here, and I thought about it, and I hoped you'd come so we could talk. It was poetry; it was—beautiful . . ."

"You know, Johnny, I'd like to write poetry. If I had the sky and the birds and the rivers and the mountains all to write about."

After a moment, Johnny Nine said, "Go ahead, tell me what the poems were about."

"Well . . ." She drew out the word slowly. "It's not what they were about, exactly. It's what they said, not out loud, but down deep. It's like getting a present that means an awful lot to you; it's not the present, but the way it makes your nose tickle and your stomach feel." She smiled wistfully.

"They were all written a long time ago, even before the First Generation, by men back on Earth, but they seemed to be written just for us . . . One was about a bird, and how it made the poet feel to watch it fly and hear it sing; it made him feel all warm inside . . . And one was about a young girl who worked in the fields, reaping grain . . ." That image seemed to reverberate in her mind, for she was quiet a moment, as if to listen for the fading echoes.

"I think that would be the most wonderful thing. To help things grow, with your own two hands, and to harvest them when they're ripe and waiting, not 'ponics, like Sam, but really growing out of the Earth."

"Someday," he said softly, "you're going to write the kind of poetry they wrote."

Marte looked down at her hands.

"I want to do so many things . . . Maybe help things grow, most of all . . . I think there must be a sort of poetry in that, too.

"Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think we could get a farm? It wouldn't have to be a very big one; just a little farm, where we could raise things?"

"If you want it, Marte."

"Oh, I do. I *do*!" Her voice carried the lilt of youth in it.

THE silences that frequently spiced their conversation had no embarrassed elements in them; they said as much as words, and they came mutually.

"Some of it was sad. The poetry. I mean, the deep kind of sadness, the real sadness, the kind that has—hopelessness, and lostness, and aloneness in it.

*"Here he lies where he
longed to be.*

*Home is the sailor, home
from the sea,
'And the hunter home
from the hill."*

She caught her breath, sharply. "That kind of sadness. The kind that says something about us. How we've dreamed and planned of going Home —"

She let her voice drift.

"I sometimes think Earth is such a beautiful place that you have to be dead to go there."

Johnny Nine said nothing.

"Think of the wide sky, Johnny. Where we can see the sunrise. I've always dreamed about seeing a sun rise.

"A sun. That's a funny word to say; it just *sounds* warm. Sun. A sun that is like those little points of light, way beyond the bulkheads. When we see them from Observation, they look all cold. Imagine how it would be to be so close to one of them that it's big and warm . . .

"Johnny, do you think anything

could be as pretty as those pictures, in Compartment Seven, of a blue and gold sunrise?"

"Even prettier."

"Say it again!"

"Even prettier."

"I'll stay up, then, all the first night. I know I will. Just to see the sun come up."

She drew in her legs and clasped her arms around them.

"Tell me again what They said."

Johnny Nine did not answer immediately. He sat motionless, trying to make out the bulkhead that marked the other side of the Ship. But their feeble light could not penetrate so much darkness. It almost seemed as if there were no other bulkhead and no Ship, only darkness, there, that spread out to the ends of the Universe.

Finally he spoke. "It was awful hard to hear them; we're too far away. As near as we could understand, they're having a celebration for us. Hundreds and hundreds of people will be there. All to see us."

"Hundreds . . . and . . . hundreds. Hundreds and hundreds!" She turned her face to his. "It seems hard to believe, doesn't it? All those people!"

"Maybe even more than that, Marte."

"Johnny?" She ducked her head and pulled her legs in tighter. "Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"We can have babies, can't we?" She asked it in a rush.

". . . Yes. We can have babies. As many as we want."

She wrinkled her nose. ". . . It seems funny, to be able to have all the babies you want. Not one every time somebody dies: but all you want!"

She smiled at some secret communication with herself. "I think we'll have a dozen . . .

"Imagine, Johnny. We can have babies that will have a real childhood. Not like ours, in the Ship, but one on Earth. They can play in the wind and in the sunshine.

"And learn things. All kinds of things. They won't be born into one particular job. They can do anything they want to—anything in the whole wide world. And they can live in the air." She blinked her eyes.

"It makes me so glad I want to cry."

THE Big Ship, the balanced terrarium of fifty lives, swung downward in her path, rushing toward her parent sun, the first interstellar voyager coming home.

Home. After twenty-one generations had peopled her vast bulk, after four hundred long years in space.

The radio in Control crackled and sputtered; the nearly seven-hour wait was over. The Captain, the Mate, and Johnny Nine, the pilot, listened intently.

The language had changed, and the voice that came out of the speaker was reedy, and thin with vast distances.

"Halloo . . . Hallooo . . ." Like a cosmic sigh. Weird. "Yur message

..." They could make out the words; the vowels were shorter, the consonants more sibilant, but they could make out the words. "... Repeat ... pilot ..." The voice rose and fell, rose and fell. Static hacked away inside the speaker, split sentences, scattered words.

"... World waiting eagerly for ..." Hiss and sputter. "In answer ... Repeat ... pilot inside Mar's orbit ... Repeat ... pilot ..."

Johnny Nine bent forward. "I guess he means we'll get a pilot ship inside the orbit of Mars. They'll probably set us around Earth. We've got too much bulk to land."

"They'll probably ferry us down in one of their best ships," the Mate said; there was a weariness and an undefined, non-directional bitterness in his voice. A germ of thought lay buried beneath the words, a half-formed memory concept; Ferry us down like they ferried our ancestors up—four hundred years ago—to the Leviathan—built in space—too big ever to land.

The voice from Earth sighed out of the speaker; only the sputter of static remained. Earth was awaiting, now, the reply.

The Mate snapped off the speaker. The new silence was stark, as if something other than sound had been withdrawn.

The Captain rubbed the back of his left hand with the palm of his right.

None of them could quite find words for their thoughts.

It was the Captain, finally, who

spoke.

"I guess—there isn't much to tell them, is there?"

The Captain turned his swivel chair until it faced the broad Observation window; through it he could see out into the inconceivable depths of star-clustered space.

"I've been thinking," he mused, half to himself. "Thinking a lot, lately." He rubbed his forehead. "About the Ship ... I've lived here a long time—my whole life. That's a long time. I was wondering how it would seem not to live here anymore."

He put his elbows on his knees and twined his hands before his face. "Not for you, Johnny. For you and Marte, and the rest of the Twenty-first Generation, that's different. I mean for us old timers. When you're twenty, there's a new world ahead; when you're fifty—it's not ahead anymore. How will it seem to us?"

The Captain shook his head slowly. "It'll sure seem funny to give this up. This room here, where I've worked all these years. This view—"

He waved his hand toward the Observation window.

"This view clear into Infinity."

Johnny Nine crossed the room and stood before the window. He gazed into space. Without turning, he began to talk. There was no excitement in his voice, only calm certainty.

"Think, Captain: think of other things. Think of trees and running water and blue sky. Think of green grass, real green grass, acres and acres of it, swaying in the wind. Think of

that."

The Captain smiled. "Ah, youth, Johnny . . . If it had been forty years ago—or thirty—or even ten . . . But now . . ." He shrugged. "We're old and set in our ways. We think of rest and of the familiar."

Johnny Nine still did not turn. "Imagine sitting on a chair, on a porch, facing out to the woods, across a field of corn. Imagine the neighborhood kids gathering about you, and you telling them how you were on the Interstellar Flight. How you came back from the stars."

"Perhaps, Johnny, perhaps . . . Perhaps . . ."

The Mate jammed full power into the heavy transmitter. "I hope these tubes hold," he said matter-of-factly. "I couldn't find the replacements."

The Captain came back from his thoughts. "Did you make a check of the Parts Index?" he asked.

"Sure. They're supposed to be in Compartment Four. Couldn't find them there. Some crazy fool probably made baby rattles out of them a hundred and fifty years ago."

"I'll send someone to see if you overlooked them. You want to go, Johnny?"

"I'll look, sure. Compartment Four, Skippy?"

"Supposed to be."

The Mate turned back to the radio. "Hello, Earth . . . Hello, Earth . . . Hello, Earth . . . This is Interstellar Flight One . . . Interstellar Flight One, inside Pluto . . . Hello, Earth, this is—"

Johnny Nine closed the door behind him and left the cramped room.

IN Compartment Four Johnny Nine switched on the lights; the large center bulb flared blue and the filaments fused. That left the compartment in gloom.

Slowly the Ship was growing old. It no longer functioned as smoothly as before; its spare parts stock was running low. Bulbs were rationed and three whole levels were in continual darkness. The long night was creeping in, as if the jet of space was slowly digesting the interloper.

"Sit down, Johnny. Old Sam wants to talk to you."

Johnny Nine dropped his hand from the switch and turned. "Oh? Oh, Sam . . . Where did you come from?"

"I seen you coming down, so I followed you. I wanted to talk to you alone. And when I seen you comin' down here, I said, 'Now, Sam, here's your chance to talk to Johnny.'"

"Yes, Sam?"

"Go ahead, Johnny, sit down."

Johnny Nine crossed to a crate that still contained parts for the atomic motor and sat down. "All right, Sam. Go ahead."

Sam shuffled his feet. "I don't know how to start, hardly. Look, Johnny. Tell me something. True. You will, won't you?"

"Yes, Sam, I will. You know that."

"Sure, I know you will. Why, don't I remember when you was just a little tyke, how you used to

come down to the gardens and watch old Sam? And I said, then, that if ever there's a boy that gives you a straight answer, that's Johnny Nine.

"I remember you sayin', once, 'Sam,' you said, 'you've to one blue eye and one brown.'" Sam smiled. "Right out you said it. An' you know, that's right. I have. Nobody else would have told me so, because they were afraid of hurting my feelings. But why should I mind that I've got one blue eye and one brown one? Funny, how other folks think you mind, when really you don't . . .

"Look, Johnny. About the gardens. I'm getting old—uh-uh, don't say it: I am and you know I am. Lately, folks have been comin' around helpin' me out. They let on that they're just there lookin', but they help me, and I know it. Is it because I'm gettin' old, Johnny?"

"Sam, you're like the Captain. Good for another twenty years."

"Now, Johnny, answer old Sam straight."

Johnny Nine hesitated. "Well," he admitted, "you aren't as young as some of us, Sam. But that doesn't mean you're old. I mean, really old." Johnny Nine turned his head so Sam could not see his face.

Sam cleared his throat. "Look, Johnny!" He held out a tiny bottle.

Johnny Nine glanced around. "Where did you get that?" he demanded angrily when he saw the bottle.

"That's all right. Old Sam's got ways. An' he'll be takin' it any day now. You just say the word, Johnny."

"Did somebody give that to you?" Johnny Nine demanded sharply.

"No. Nobody gave it to me. Old Sam's had this bottle for years. Just waitin', Johnny. Just waitin'. For somebody to say the word."

"Give it to me!"

Sam snatched back the bottle. "No!" His weak old eyes showed traces of fire. "No. Old Sam's—"

"Sam," Johnny Nine said gently, "we're almost Home, Sam, almost Home."

Sam laughed bitterly. He shook his head. "No, Johnny. Can't fool old Sam. 'Course folks *say* we are. But I *know*. Old Sam knows. I'll be drinkin' this any day now."

"Sam, listen. In four—" He bit his tongue before he could say 'months'. That superstition. "In a little while, we'll be Home. It's true, Sam, I wouldn't lie."

Sam's eyes brightened. "You ain't foolin' me?"

"No, Sam."

SAM seemed to relax. "Home," he said. "You know, Johnny, lately I've been dreamin' of Home. Now you say we're almost there . . . You know, I remember, when old John Turner—I guess you don't remember old John—before your time—when old John, well, he told Molly Dawn (she was his partner), he said, 'Molly, it sure looks like the only way *we* can get Home is live as long an' as useful a life as Sam. Because Sam is just too stubborn to grow old like the rest of us.' Yes, sir, that's just what he said: 'Old Sam is too

downright stubborn to grow old like the rest of us."

Sam slapped his knee. "Now don't that beat all? 'Too stubborn,' he says."

Sam leaned back against a row of crates. His eyes glistened in the light. Then the excitement died from them.

"No, Johnny. It don't seem right for me to go on livin' when people come down to 'ponics every day to do my work. It *ain't* right, Johnny."

"But Sam—"

"Oh. I know. You tell me we're almost Home. But Johnny," Sam leaned forward, "there ain't no Home. It's just a story they tell you when you're little . . . Or maybe when you're old, like me. There ain't nothing but this here Ship and—"

"Sam, listen—"

"But me no buts, Johnny. Old Sam knows. Yes, sir, he's been around too long. You're all trying to fool him, but you're not." He paused for breath. "I *know*, Johnny. That's why I got this here bottle. You don't need to hint around, trying to make it easy. You just speak up. Old Sam can do what's got to be done."

Johnny Nine stood up.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to take that bottle, Sam."

"No, Johnny."

"Give it to me!"

Johnny Nine took the bottle and smashed it against the deck plates.

"We'll never need one of those again. Where we're going there's no tolerance factor. A man doesn't have to die just because he can't do all

the work he once could. Earth is such a big terrarium that a man can just keep on living."

"Johnny, old Sam's confused. He's all mixed up." One lone tear ran down his cheek.

"You go to your cabin and get some rest. You'll never need a bottle. Understand that, Sam? You'll never need a bottle."

Then you weren't foolin' me? We're really goin' Home? Somebody said we were, and I thought we were, and then I thought you were all foolin' me and then—

"I guess I better had, Johnny. Old Sam's tired. Old Sam's awful tired."

He limped out of the compartment.

Johnny Nine watched his back until it disappeared down the companionway ladder to the passenger quarters. The rest of the passengers had been doing Sam's work for nearly three years now. But it didn't matter. They were so near Home that it didn't matter. They no longer needed to produce a balance for a new generation; it was journey's end.

Johnny Nine began to rummage through the supplies, extra parts for all sorts of fancied emergencies that never occurred, and no parts, of course, for those that did, over the long, four hundred years of the trip.

Johnny Nine finally found the radio spares. Mislaidd behind a mass of junk that once had been air control gauges. One of the First Generation had smashed the gauges when he went mad. But the Ship had been lucky. It had survived without them.

“HELLO, Johnny. The Captain said you were—oh! Johnny?”

Johnny Nine looked up; he smiled. He slipped out of the headset. “Lo, Marte. They’re broadcasting music to us. Want to listen?” He held out the headset. “It sounds better over these than over the speaker.”

She crossed to him, in lithe, swaying youth movements, and took the headset. She fitted it over her hair and began to listen.

At first her face was expressionless. After a while, her mouth formed a little “o” and her eyes widened; she stood for a long time listening, making no sound.

Finally, she removed the headset and laid it on the table. She seemed vaguely puzzled.

“It’s awful funny music, isn’t it, Johnny? Not at all like ours . . .

“But then I guess they’d think our songs— —”

She began to hum the tune of *Long Night*. Then she sang softly:

“It’s a long night,

A dark night,

Before the day.

It’s a long night before

the long day,

And we’re going Home:

Yes

We’re going Home!”

She stopped.

“I guess they’ll think that’s funny, Johnny. Let’s not sing it for them, ever. If somebody would laugh at that, it would hurt me, down inside. Let’s never sing it again.”

“All right, Marte,” Johnny Nine said.

After a moment, he stood up. “You didn’t come here with the rest.”

“No . . . I wanted to wait. I hoped maybe I could look at it while you were here. Just you and me.”

He crossed to the Observation window. “It’s just the little ‘scope . . . But here, I’ll— —”

He peered into the eyepiece and adjusted the knobs. “There . . . Ah . . . That does it. There, Marte.”

He stood aside.

She bent over the telescope. The silence drew out and out, almost breath-held.

“It’s . . . It’s . . . Johnny, I feel like it was ours. Just yours and mine. Isn’t it beautiful, all hazy blue?”

“Can you see the continents?”

“Yes . . . Yes, I think I can. Not very well. Just dark patches.”

She looked up. “It looks so little, Johnny, like a little ball. So little that if I had a chain, I could put it on it and then wear the chain around my neck.”

Johnny Nine laughed gently. “But it’s really big, Marte. Bigger than the Ship. A hundred times that big, a thousand— —”

“A million!”

“Yes, maybe even that. It doesn’t seem possible, does it?”

“Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, I’m so happy!” She looked into the eyepiece again. “I’ll never forget this, not as long as I live. That little tiny ball and the Sun. I think I feel something like God must have felt when he *made it*.”

“If you were to look hard enough,

Marte, you could almost see our little farm down there— —"

"Our farm . . . Say it again, Johnny."

"Our farm," he said.

THE Ship drew nearer and nearer. The balanced terrarium pointed Home, rushing faster than the wind, faster than sound, faster— —

The Captain sat at his desk. For the past hour he had been drawing strange designs, contorted in helical animation, on a pad of yellow paper. Occasionally, he paused to stare out of the Observation window, lost in thought.

Absently, he let the pencil drop to the deck; the sound it made spun away his reverie. He bent and retrieved the pencil.

"Skippy?"

The Mate looked up from a book. "Yes?"

The Captain chuckled. "I've been thinking about what Johnny said a while back."

The Mate waited.

"You see that star, out there, Skippy? The bright one, there on the left of the field? I've been watching her for years. Even thought up a name for her. Mary Anne. It almost seems that if I could say something, in just the right way, she could understand and answer me."

The Mate closed the book and placed it on the table. When the two of them were alone, they sometimes talked of things that only friends can talk of. He maintained an encourag-

ing silence.

"I've been thinking, too," the Captain continued, "that when I get to Earth, I can still see Mary Anne. If I know where to look, she'll be there, just the same as always . . .

"There was old Grandfather John Turner (you remember how he used to cuss the filters?) Remember how he talked of going Home. 'I won't live to see it,' he would say. 'I won't be here then,' he would say. But when he talked about it, it didn't seem to matter . . .

"It was the dream that mattered. A dream of everything that's wonderful. It meant peace and beauty and rest. It meant something too wonderful ever to happen . . . For him, it was just a dream.

"Now that we can practically touch it, and see it, and feel it, I find it a rather frightening thing. It makes me feel cold inside; it makes my mouth get dry; it makes my hair prickle.

"Funny, how it gets me."

"I know what you mean," the Mate said.

"Maybe I've been afraid all along to admit that I wanted to go Home; afraid that somehow wanting something so much like a dream would keep me from ever getting it.

"But now that we're almost there, I've changed. Remember what Johnny said, 'How would you like to sit on a porch and tell the kids how you came back from the stars?'"

The Mate nodded and smiled. "It kinda got me too."

The Captain looked at the icy

points of light again, set against the ebon of eternal night. "It does get you . . .

"On Earth, Mary Anne will sparkle. I guess everything sparkles there. Stars sparkle; water sparkles in the sunlight; the air sparkles; life sparkles."

He stood up and turned his back on the window.

"You know, once I get my feet down there, I'm going to see that they stay. I'm never going to take them off. Not even so much as a single mile. I'm going to get me a bushel basket, and I'm going to fill it with Earth, and when I go to bed, I'm going to have it right there beside me, so I can reach out with my hands, anytime in the night, and feel it."

"For a long time, Ed, I was scared, like you were, that something would happen. But now we're so near, I don't know . . . I was afraid that maybe things had changed; that there wouldn't be any people. That maybe—I guess I always see the dark side, don't I?"

The Captain said, "Maybe there's some good in that. But this time I'm going to sound a little like Johnny. Things may have changed, Skippy. From what we've read about. We've got to expect that. But it can't be too different. We can adjust. Man can always adjust."

He turned again to the window.

"And there's always Earth herself. You can look through the 'scope and see her out there, just like she's been for a billion years. Home. That

hasn't changed. The air of Home; the water of Home. That doesn't change."

"I guess you're right, Ed," the Mate agreed. "That can't change."

HE found her down below the motors on the last level. Their light was burning dimly.

She had been crying.

Johnny Nine stood watching her for a long time. Finally he said, "I'm sorry, Marte."

She looked up. Her face was tear-cast, and her eyes were red. "It's . . . It's . . ." Her voice caught in a sob. "Oh, Johnny, why? *Why*, Johnny?"

Johnny Nine had no answer to that question.

"Why did he have to do it—just when we were almost Home?" She began to cry again.

He sat down beside her, drew her head over on his shoulder.

"We've all got to die sometime. You, me . . . Sam."

"But not now, Johnny. Not *now*!"

He let out his breath in a long sigh. "I know. I—I liked Sam. He was always good to me, always ready to stop work and explain things to me. But he was old, Marte, so awful old."

"But not to see Home, when you're almost there . . . He looked through the 'scope, but his eyes were bad and he couldn't see it. And he thought we were all fooling him . . . But Johnny, he'd *had* to believe, once he got his feet down on Earth, once the wind was all around him. Even if he was old. He'd *had to* believe,

then."

"I know, Marte."

There was silence for a moment.

"You know what they say. 'When you die, you go to Earth'. Maybe Sam's already there. Ahead of us. Somehow."

"He used to tell me—me—me—"

She choked up; she let out her breath unevenly. "When I was little and went down to look at the gardens, he used to tell me how he—"

"Don't, Marte. Try not to think of it."

"All right, Johnny. I won't. I'll try not to think of it. But Johnny—"

"Now, now, that's enough."

For fully five minutes neither of them spoke.

Then Marte asked, in a small voice, "Johnny?"

"Yes."

"I wonder how he got the bottle."

"Please, Marte . . ."

"I know, Johnny. But that way. It was so cruel. If he'd just waited." She looked at Johnny Nine.

"Johnny?"

He was staring at his sandals.

"Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"We aren't—aren't going to reconvert him, are we? Not now?"

"No, Marte." Johnny Nine took a deep breath. "Not now. We're going to take him with us, and bury him, really bury him. Put the Earth over him. He'd like that, Marte. Not in the reconverter, but in the cool Earth, the Earth of Home."

"Yes," she said very softly, "he'd like that."

CLOSER and closer. The Ship was well inside Jupiter, skyrocketing to her rendezvous with the pilot ship. The radio lapse was less than thirty minutes now.

The Captain turned from the speaker. "You heard it, Johnny. What can we tell them?"

Earth wanted press comments. *Tell us about the trip!*

The Mate stood up.

Johnny Nine shuffled his feet. There was an awkward silence.

The History of the Ship. Which of them would dare attempt that?

The life of twenty-one generations; the death of nineteen; the dream of Earth . . .

Their little, circumscribed hopes and fears. The little things out of the night drench of a thousand lives. How well they lived together, the mutual respect and the mutual affection . . .

The little things whose total is life. Or the big things.

Like the Great Sickness, during the Second Generation. It had almost finished the Ship.

The little things and the big, all rolled into an emotion that meant the Ship. That was the Ship . . .

The History of the Ship. Who could tell that? Who?

The Captain walked to the transmitter. He picked up the microphone and switched the "send" lever over.

"Hello, Earth . . . Hello, Earth . . . Interstellar Flight One . . . Interstellar Flight One . . . For your press . . . Repeat . . . For your press . . ."

There was only one thing to say: "We're coming Home!"

That single sentence crackled its way across the vastness of space.

THE Ship sped on. Its forty-nine people worked and slept and played, as their fathers before them, and *their* fathers before that. But their hearts were glad with a new gladness.

"We're inside Mars!"

Johnny Nine settled back in the pilot seat, aft in the Ship, above the tubes.

"We're inside Mars!"

No one heard him. He was alone in the cramped pilot quarters.

He threw in the forward jets, unused for almost two hundred years, cut in the forward jets to break their fall. Prayed.

The great Ship trembled.

Johnny Nine's hands skipped, in carefully trained movement, over a bewildering array of firing studs. His eyes seemed to dart everywhere, checking the banks of dials. The tempo increased. For ten years he had trained for this job; he knew it well.

Then the Ship began to turn. Slowly, lazily, its nose spewing fire.

It took two hours, and by then, Johnny Nine was exhausted. But it was done. His job was done. He had set the Ship safely in an orbit around the Sun, between Mars and Earth.

He left the tiny pilot cabin.

They would be waiting for him, forward. He wanted to run along the long companionway. He forced himself to walk. His heart was hammer-

ing with a mounting tempo.

* * *

They were all assembled in the play-area, the only large open space in the whole Ship. Johnny Nine came out onto the platform above it. His hands gripped the guard rail tightly.

He looked down at the passengers below him, saw their white up-turned faces, strained, tense. Saw Marte, holding her breath.

"You felt the jets," he said, and his voice carried clear. "That means we're in an orbit around the Sun. Our own Sun. Just like a planet."

There were no cheers. His announcement was greeted only by the low hum of voices, breaking like wind in pines, a sigh of relief.

Then there was a stunned silence, when, for a moment, no one knew quite what to do with himself.

After that, they began to mill around, each going to his neighbor and repeating the news again.

"Well, we're Home."

"Yes, we're Home."

THE Ship drifted in its orbit, now, like a planet, like a very small planet, the balanced terrarium.

"Listen!" the Mate said. "I've got him!"

He took off the headset and switched open the speaker.

"Interstellar Flight One . . ."

The voice sounded strong and clear and near.

The Mate spoke into the microphone.

And then they waited, their eyes on the huge sweep hand of the clock.

One second, two, three—

Four—

Five . . .

"Flight One. Read you fine. Expect to make approach within an hour. Has yur Ship a carrier magnet plate for coupling?"

The Captain frowned. "Tell him no."

"Hello, pilot ship. No magnet plate, repeat, no magnet plate."

". . . All right, Flight One. Has yur Ship serviceable suits?"

The Captain said, "Better check them, Johnny."

Johnny Nine left at a run to test the space suits.

It took him almost half an hour. When he came back, he was breathless.

"They tested, Captain!"

The Mate threw the sending switch.

"Pilot ship. Have suits. Repeat. Have suits."

"Look!" Johnny Nine cried. He was pointing to the Observation window. "See it, that little light. It's their ship!"

The three men looked.

They could see a moving finger of fire, like a tiny comet, except that its tail thrust sunward.

"Have located yur Ship, Flight One. We are making ready for the approach."

The radio was silent a moment. Then:

"We have a request."

"Yes?" the Mate said into the microphone.

". . . We have full transmission

equipment on our ship for a world program. Since you have no magnet plates to couple us, will you send one of yur passengers over for formal welcome?"

"Tell them yes."

"Yes," the Mate echoed.

The wait was infinitesimal now.

"Fine. Brief ceremony planned. To be broadcast to the three planets. At conclusion of it, we will send yur pilot to you. He will move yur Ship into an orbit around Earth, and you can be taken down within three days. That will be the fastest course, and we know all of you are anxious to land at the first possible moment."

Johnny Nine started for the door.

"Wait!" the Captain ordered. "I'll tell the passengers. You get ready to board their ship for the welcome."

Johnny Nine felt a lump in his throat. "Yes, sir!"

"Hello, Flight One. We can approach you to a thousand meters."

MARTE helped him into his suit. Her fingers fluttered nervously.

"Three days, Johnny. Three days! It's not bad luck to say it anymore. Only three more days and we'll be Home!"

Johnny Nine worked the hermetically sealed helmet swivel. His movements were stiff.

"Three days."

"And then—"

"Marte, I love you."

"Of course you do, but say it again."

"I love you, Marte."

He kissed her lightly.

"I love you too," she told him.

The passengers all gathered around him at the air lock. He looked at them, saw each of their faces, knew them as friends.

Over to one side was a long, rude box. Newly made. Sam spoke to him from the muted memory of the dead; the memory not of Sam alone, but of nineteen generations.

Marte, standing at Johnny Nine's side, clinging to his arm, looked up at him, and smiled. She was beautiful with the innocence of youth, and her smile was that of a girl who has never seen her dreams crushed.

He tried to think of something to say.

Finally, in desperation, he said:

"I won't be gone long."

He reached up and flipped his helmet forward. He buckled it in place with stiff fingers and stepped into the airlock. The door clanged shut behind him.

The outer door opened into space and he popped away from the Ship, borne outward by the air pressure.

It was silent.

He could tell by the way the Ship appeared and disappeared that he was spinning end over end. There was no gravity, even this close to the Ship's artificial fields.

It was the first time any of his generation had been in free space.

It was awkward. He floundered.

He could see the pilot ship lying off there to his left. Above him.

Below him.

He tried to do something about that, fumbled for the blast studs,

found them, pushed one.

It was like guiding a very small rocket that has very powerful trigger jets.

It seemed to take an eternity to bring himself under control.

But he drew nearer the pilot ship.

He pushed a stud.

The ship loomed large; it hit him. He tried to twist as he had read it should be done, to place his feet against the ship's plates.

Got them there . . . and drifted away.

He realized that he had forgotten to switch on the magnetic shoe plates.

He magnetized his plates, gritted his teeth, pushed a stud.

He hit the ship. Hard. Rolled.

There. He was all right now.

He walked toward the open port. It was a peculiar process. First he cut off the left magnet, lifted his left foot, then . . .

HE was inside. Inside the space port of the pilot ship. The outer door swung closed.

Darkness. Then they switched on a light.

After what seemed a long time, there was enough air around him that he could hear it his from the vent through his built in outer pick-up.

The inner door opened.

He stepped into the ship proper.

There was a group of friendly Earth-faces waiting for him. They were smiling.

His muscles were knotted with tension. He fumbled with his helmet. He

couldn't hold his hands still. They slipped. He twisted at the helmet, futilely.

One of the Earthmen stepped forward to help.

Then. It was off.

And with that, he knew that he was Home. He felt the tension flow away to be replaced by a singing excitement, an excitement so intense as to be almost unbearable.

Something had to give.

. . . Suddenly he thought of how he must have looked, crossing to the pilot ship—how awkward he must have seemed to the trained spacemen around him.

He started to laugh, explosively. At himself. Twisting awkwardly in space. It was funny.

He laughed, and he didn't care what the Earthmen thought, seeing him laugh. Even if they thought he had gone crazy, he didn't care.

That was the first thing he did. Laugh.

After that . . .

At first he could not understand what was wrong. The laughter died; it sputtered and died in a strangled gasp.

Then he thought he had eaten fire, and his throat and lungs were raw.

Johnny Nine swayed on his feet. The magnetized soles kept him erect. The Earth-faces spun dizzily around him. He reached for his helmet, instinctively, reached and missed, reached again.

He clawed frantically at his helmet, and everything around him turned black.

The helmet fell in place with a loud clang of steel on steel.

HE was unconscious only five minutes, but, as consciousness flowed back, he felt his head hammer with sharp pains, and lights danced before his eyes. He was afraid he was going to be sick inside the space suit.

It was fifteen minutes before he was recovered enough to listen to what they had to tell him.

An Earth doctor, the pilot ship's surgeon, made it very plain.

" . . . Twenty-one generations is a long time," the doctor had told him, "for an animal that can adapt itself as easily as man . . ."

Johnny Nine could complete the rest of it: Sometime, long ago, perhaps as early as the Second Generation, perhaps at the time of the Great Sickness, the terrarium had been thrown out of balance. And, as the balance continued to shift, man continued to adapt.

Until—

He could hear them, around him, talking quietly.

"We haven't told yur Ship, yet. We thought you'd better do that."

"Yes," Johnny Nine choked.

The Earthmen fell silent, ringing him in.

"Yes," he said, "I'll tell them. I'll tell them Earth's air is poison, and her water, and her land." His voice was hollow. "I'll tell them that."

He staggered toward the space port, blindly.

"We're sorry."

Johnny Nine looked at them, the ring of friendly, kindly, sad faces.

"So—are—we," he said very slowly.

He stepped into the lock, and, when the outer door opened, he popped away from the pilot ship.

He floated toward the Ship that

was Home.

How am I going to tell them? he asked himself. How am I going to tell them?

And Marte? Tell her that she will never feel the free wind on her face?

Johnny Nine floated awkwardly away from the pilot ship.

THE END

The Editorial . . . (Concluded from page 5)

tention even now to two new writers we have accepted for inclusion in these pages: Elizabeth Curtis of Canton, New York, has a novelette coming up soon that shows a remarkable talent. It is a story of old people and their problem adjusting to an era where advanced age is treated like a disease—to be shunned. It has sociological impact and might well be read by everyone in our present day world. We predict that Miss Curtis will go far in the science-fantasy field. And there is Harold Annas, who has a new and refreshing style of writing, and more so, a new approach to accepted story ideas. In his *THE ULTIMATE QUEST* you will read as charming a satire on man as you will ever have the pleasure of coming across.

THE above two examples are only that. We mention them only to indicate once again that in *IMAGINATION* you will meet new writers who have talent and are deserving of the opportunity to express it. We will take pride in the success your reception accords them.

A word about our covers. We feel that with this first issue you are being offered a really fine artist

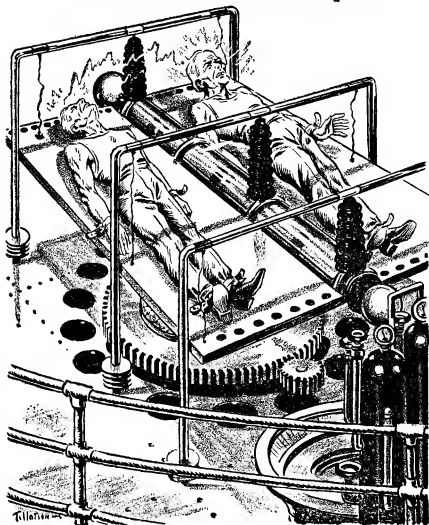
with a striking and talented style. We also think that Hannes Bok has captured the mood of the magazine and expressed it admirably with oils. Our future covers will be as fine artistically as this first. And one more word on our covers. You will find no BEMs on *IMAGINATION*. As with our stories, our covers will have two characteristics: quality and dignity. Our artists will be carefully chosen, and their work subject to the most exacting detail. The result can be nothing less than excellent. And it will also be new. You will see new techniques in cover work as time goes on. New color composition-styling, new expression of conventional themes. Covers that are imaginative—in keeping with the magazine they depict.

THIS then is to be your magazine. Pages of the finest stories your editors can find. Covers that will lead the field with freshness and originality. A magazine with tone. We have our goal. It is not an easy one. We may make mistakes, and if so, we want to know about them. But the end result will be in years to come what Forrie Ackerman so eloquently toasted: "To the Magazine OF the future—WITH a future!" . . . Rap.

ONE FOR THE ROBOT —

By **ROG PHILLIPS**

The ingredients were simple: one man for one robot. But the results were something else!



A wild laughter filled his eyes as he adjusted the controls and turned to see

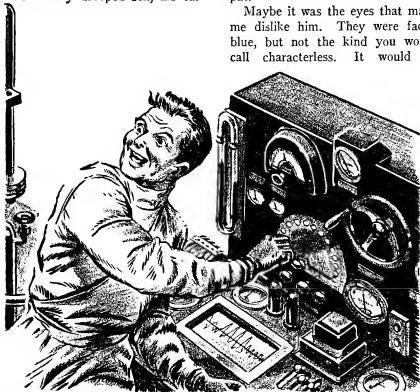
TWO FOR THE SAME . . .

I took an instinctive disliking to him from the very first. I don't know exactly what caused it. His appearance? He wore a well tailored gray plaid suit draped on what I would have sworn to be nothing but a skeleton. Blue-veined skin fitted over the exposed parts, such as his long slender hands, folded together on his lap, the stretch of bare leg below the cuffs of his perfectly pressed trousers and above his carelessly drooped sox, his tur-

key-like neck with its large Adam's apple threatened at any moment to wobble up and down while a gobble-gobble-gobble burst forth.

His face? It made me think of a broken handled cup inverted on a saucer, the edge of the saucer being his jaw line. If you were to wrap the cup and saucer in tightly stretched dull white plastic or rubber sheeting and paint eyes in the proper places you would have it down pat.

Maybe it was the eyes that made me dislike him. They were faded blue, but not the kind you would call characterless. It would be



the figures stiffen under the jolting impact of the high electrical charge . . .

more accurate to call them emotionless. Not emotionless in a cold way, but in a dead way.

On either side of his head were cartilages shaped like ears, and over the top of his head faded and lifeless grey hair parted with artificial neatness.

Those were my impressions, though the hair was real enough, and I might have seen him through different eyes if I had been in a better mood.

He wore his suit like it didn't belong to him, or if it did he very seldom had one on. I looked closely at him, sitting near me on the park bench half turned toward where I was slouched, trying to imagine what type of clothes would be natural to him; all I could conjure up was a white frock and rubber gloves and a white face mask.

He had asked me, "Are you unemployed?", and I had swallowed an impulse to snap at him long enough to size him up.

So now I had sized him up. I didn't like anything about him. But a civil answer to his question might lead to the price of a badly needed meal. I forced a polite grin.

"Not at the moment," I said.

"I surmised as much," he said quickly, smirking. His voice had the quality of a high school chemistry teacher talking to an audience of sulphuric acid carboys.

I turned away, looking out across the expanse of lawn and trees and flower beds of the park to where the double decker busses bobbed

along like water bugs above the carpet of cars flowing along the inner drive. The impatient honking of tired motorists on their way home after their day's work mingled with the contented quacking of ducks on the pond at my back.

"Would you like to earn some money?"

"Huh?" I said, jerking my attention back to him.

His smile was the kind a professor would give to a pupil who had just awakened from a sound sleep.

"I said, would you like to earn some money?"

"Uh uh," I said. "I'm hungry. I'd mow your lawn on an empty stomach and get maybe fifty cents. That's one hamburger and two cups of coffee. I'd still be hungry."

Instead of answering, he reached one of his blue-veined hands inside his coat and drew out a new looking black leather billfold. I watched him while he pulled out a thick sheaf of currency.

He carefully counted out ten twenty dollar bills, dropping them one by one in a neat pile on the park bench. He stuck the rest back in his billfold and took out a white glossy card, dropping it on the pile of bills.

Then, smirking, he stood up and turned his back on me, slowly walking down the path that wound up onto a bridge over the duck pond, without looking back.

I waited until he was out of sight, then picked up the card and read the name printed on it in raised

green lettering: Dr. Leopold Moriss.

I had a hamburger and two cups of coffee in a place where they'd never seen me before. It would have been too hard to explain a twenty dollar bill. Afterward I rented a room and soaked some of the accumulated dirt out of my pores.

Next morning I bought a new suit and the things that go with it. By noon I was wearing a hundred of that two hundred dollars. Most of the rest was in my pocket.

Everything was fine, except that Dr. Leopold Moriss' smirking bloodless lips and dead eyes, framed by his skin-covered jaw kept dancing before me, taunting me, daring me to use that money without eventually showing up to earn it.

I began to dislike him even more intensely. Instead of having lunch I went into a cocktail lounge and had a few Bourbons straight. When their warmth began to soak in Dr. Leopold's smirking face faded.

It came back, though, and with it came his classroom voice.

"I don't know who you are," it taunted. *"If you never show up I can't find you, can't do anything about it."* Its tones were laughing, knowing, goading. I drank. The face faded, the voice became inaudible.

Three days later, and God knows how many quarts, I took that drink every alcoholic dreads—the one you can't keep down.

I awoke a long time later and opened my eyes. Something vaguely

like the desk clerk was hovering over me. A loud voice was pounding unmercifully against my tortured ears.

"Come on, get up and get out of here, you filthy bum," it was shouting. "We've got no rooms for the likes of you in this hotel."

I shook my head to clear away the fog over my eyes. The indignant face of a maid was staring at me.

"You ought to be ashamed," she said shrilly, "vomiting on the rug! Where do you think you are, in the park?"

"Get a wet towel and bring him to," the desk clerk ordered. . . .

I reached the precarious footing of the sidewalk with a feeling that I had been rushed too much, and with the afternoon sun ejecting fiery red shafts of searing pain into my brain through my punctured eyeballs.

People were staring at me as they passed. In an attempt to appear casual I stuck my hands in my pockets. The fingers of my right hand encountered something stiff, with sharp corners.

Swaying to maintain my balance, and casually whistling snatches of some nameless tune, I pulled the thing out and held it up where I could focus my eyes on it. It was Dr. Leopold Moriss' card.

I managed an uncertain about face and thumbed my nose at the entrance to the hotel; only it was my ear, and my thumb bumped it so painfully that the pleasure I had

anticipated at my insult was destroyed.

When my consciousness settled into enough stability to be aware of outside impressions once more, I was in a taxi, bumping along a cobblestone street. There were no springs on the cab, and the back of the driver's head sneered at me and dared me to open the door and jump to my death.

I wondered where I was being taken. Then my eyes caught the white rectangle still held in my fingers. The doctor's card. So I was on my way at last.

On my way? I was there! The taxi had swerved abruptly to the curb and stopped. I slid forward off the seat. When the driver came around and opened the door I managed to get up on my knees. That was all.

He opened the door and stood there patiently. I studied the sidewalk and tried to figure out how to make it from the position I was in. I gave up, and appealed to him with my eyes.

"Here we go," he said good naturedly, lifting me out and balancing me carefully on my feet. "The fare is a buck eighty-five."

"Help me up the steps," I said, stalling. I was trying to remember if I had any money left. I had a strong suspicion I hadn't.

His hands held me up and pushed me across the walk and up the steps while I fumbled in a fruitless search of my pockets.

At the top of the steps my fingers

encountered the cool smoothness of a piece of paper in my coat pocket. I pulled it out and held it up to the driver. He steadied me against the frame of the door. Then he counted out change, closing my fingers over the money.

The sound of the taxi pulling away from the curb let me know I was on my own. It was a diminishing yellow spot far down the street.

The door frame was white set in brick. The door was stained oak. I reached out to lift the knocker and saw I had a fist full of money. I reached out with the other hand. It had the card in it. I hooked the little finger under the knocker and lifted it, letting it fall. It emitted a feeble tap.

After a while I saw the door moving inward. Pausing in my futile stabbing for my pockets, I lifted my eyes slowly, beginning with the shapely hips encased in spotlessly clean watermelon red, past the slim waist with its black belt, pausing at the firm lift of the breast, jumping to the smooth neck, and finally coming to the face with its smooth contours, red lips, blue eyes lit with questioning curiosity, and iridescent waves of spun brown hair.

Not daring to talk, I mutely held out the card.

HER graceful curves of eyebrows lifted just a trifle as she looked at the card. Then her eyes surveyed me again, quickly.

"Won't you please come in?" she

asked, stepping backward invitingly.

I went past her with an attempt at dignity. The door closed behind me. Her feet tapped pertly on the foyer floor as she went past me and opened another door.

"Wait in here Mr. Stevens," she said, her voice rich in velvet overtones. "I'll tell my father you're here."

I ducked my head at her in acquiescence and went past her into the room, a luxurious library.

The door closed softly as I dropped into the soft enfoldment of a pillow-lined barrel chair. Abruptly I sat up, staring at the blank face of the closed door, my eyes large and round.

She had called me by name!

I was still staring at the door when it jerked open. Dr. Leopold Moriss strode in closing it after him, his steps and motions jerky and swift.

"Well well well," he said. "So you came after all."

"How did your daughter know my name?" I asked.

His shoulders arched back in a gesture of amusement.

"She should know," he said. "I've done nothing but talk about January Stevens this and January Stevens that for the past two months."

"Two months?" I echoed dumbly.

"The detective agency I put on the job of finding you did an almost impossible job," he went on, in high good humor. "They followed you from the time you moved out of your bachelor apartment three

years ago, to Los Angeles, Seattle, through Kansas, and right back here to Chicago again. When they found you they came and got me, and pointed you out to me in the park."

"I don't get it," I said, bewildered. "That kind of a search would cost plenty. After paying that kind of dough I can understand your willingness to throw two hundred after it in a—childish gesture. But why? Since you know me, you must know I was kicked out of the Bentley Research Laboratories because I refused to account for five thousand dollars of research funds."

"I know more than that," Dr. Leopold Moriss said, crisp sureness in his tones.

"What do you mean?" I asked woodenly.

"Let's just say for the present. January," he said, "that I know why you refused to account for those funds."

"Let's just say goodbye," I said, staggering to my feet. I started for the door.

"Sit down, you drunken bum," he said.

"Why you—" I snarled, turning toward him sober with rage, my fingers constricting.

He sat there, grinning at me, undisturbed by my threatening posture. As if to flaunt his unconcern in my face he took out a long cigar and lit it nonchalantly.

I stared into his lifeless eyes through the screen of freshly gen-

erated blue smoke and sat down slowly.

He looked back at me, his face expressionless behind the cigar. My rage subsided gradually.

"That's better," he said finally. From that moment I hated him.

Then the door opened. The girl in the watermelon red dress entered, wheeling a tray crowded with white sandwiches, green pickles and steaming black coffee.

I scowled at the dream from heaven pushing the service cart, a friendly smile on her red lips, feeling a sense of defeat, of being crowded into a corner.

"No thanks," I said harshly. "My stomach couldn't hold even the coffee right now." I jerked my eyes away from hers, past Dr. Leopold Moriss, to the curtains on the windows.

"Get him a big glass of half tomato juice half grapefruit juice," the doctor said. "He can hold that down. It'll make him feel better."

I continued to hold my eyes on the curtains, but I knew that I was licked. Whipped. Beaten into submission. When I heard the pert footsteps return and felt the cold roundness of the glass against my hand, I turned and looked up into her smiling, sympathetic eyes.

"Thanks," I said gruffly.

THE cold liquid stayed down, soothing the raw walls of my stomach. I half closed my eyes, experiencing the first pleasant body sensation since the warm glow of

that first drink three or four days before.

I watched shapely legs below the swishing dress as they went across the room to a desk. When they returned I looked up to see a cigarette between fingernails the same shade of red as the dress. I followed the slender fingers to the slim wrist, up the graceful, slightly tanned arm to the short sleeve, and from there my eyes jumped to her smiling red lips.

"I'm Paula, January," she said.

"Oh yes, January," Dr. Moriss' voice broke in. "This is my daughter, Paula. Her mother died many years ago. There's just the two of us, besides the handyman."

I took the cigarette from her fingers without taking my eyes away from her face. She snapped a lighter and lit it the same way. I inhaled deeply, letting the smoke out slowly.

"Glad to know you, Paula," I murmured.

"I think you'd better leave us now, Paula," Dr. Moriss broke in in his school teacher voice. "January Stevens and I have a lot to discuss."

"We can talk later, if at all," I turned on him angrily. "Two or three days from now, after my stomach will hold food down."

"We'll talk now," he said with maddening calmness. "Three days from now you'll have had time to think. You'll refuse to talk. Just like you let yourself be branded a thief rather than talk before."

I reached out and picked up a cup of coffee from the tray. With slow deliberation I poured the black liquid into the empty glass that had held my tomato and grapefruit juice. There was a large plate glass mirror on the wall across the room. I threw the empty cup at it without rising from my chair. The mirror shattered.

Dr. Moriss looked back and forth from me to the broken mirror, like a spectator at a tennis match, the same kind of interest portrayed on his face.

"Why did you do that?" Paula asked, her eyes flashing fire.

"He did it because he likes you, Paula," the doctor's maddeningly unperturbed voice said. "If he didn't like you he would have thrown it at me." He puffed mockingly at his cigar, his eyes squinting through the smoke.

"You *are* expensive to know, January," Paula purred. The sound of her heels on the bare floor near the door jerked my eyes from Dr. Moriss' face.

"Don't leave," I said hastily.

"Why?" Paula asked, turning, her hand still on the knob.

"Because—" her father began.

"Shut up!" I snapped. "I'll tell her myself. Because if you do I might kill your father before I walk out of here."

Dr. Moriss nodded agreement, puffing contentedly, his features mocking me through the haze.

"He's afraid, Paula," he said abruptly. "It's the same fear that

made him destroy his research and all the bills for materials and his notes, and let them smirch his name." He lifted on his elbows and leaned toward me. "The same fear that made you an alcoholic bum, January. But I'm going to get under that fear and find out what you discovered."

"You think so?" I sneered, my voice sounding reedy to my ears.

"Yes," he said. "You see, I've got to. I know everything you know — except what made you afraid."

"You think so?" I repeated monotonously.

"Yes," he matched my monotony. "Everything except that. I'll prove it to you. I know how you built the synthetic brain. I know how you built the robot body. I even know how you charged the brain. I even know that that Boston Bull Terrier pet you had at your feet while they questioned you, and which followed you out the door when you left, disgraced, *was not a living creature!*"

I lifted my hands and looked at them. They were trembling so much their outlines were blurred.

"Show him to his room," Dr. Leopold Moriss said suddenly. "Keep a generous supply of grapefruit and tomato juice near him."

"You heard what the man said." Paula soothed gently, tugging at the shoulder of my coat.

At the door I turned ponderously. Dr. Moriss was sitting there, his eyes on me, puffing at his ci-

gar. Dully I turned away, following Paula into the hall. The door closed. . . .

THE bed was soft. The kind you sink down into, surrounded by billowing piles of shiny pink satin, fluffy orchid wool, white sheets, and an atmosphere of apple blossoms, with your head resting on down softer and warmer than your mother's breast.

The pajamas were new and my size, obviously bought in anticipation of my showing up.

I stood teetering in the middle of the bedroom, looking at them, the sound of water running into a tub coming from the adjoining bathroom. Tears forced themselves into my eyes. Hot scalding tears.

Paula stood less than three feet from me, an eager expression on her face, like a Spaniel wiggling in expectation of voiced approval.

I turned and staggered blindly toward the door. I wanted to get out. I felt strangled. I couldn't breathe, couldn't possibly get another breath of air until I got out of this house and felt my feet on God's pavement again. I fumbled for the knob, groaning in frantic desperation to escape.

My fingers settled around the knob. I jerked the door open and started out into the hall.

The placid face of a man twice my size, radiating peace and good will, blocked the doorway. I blinked at him blearily, backing away a step or two. He blinked back like

a simpleton trying to understand geometry.

"Oh, January," Paula said behind me. "This is Carl Friedman, our Jack-of-all-work."

"Pleased to meet you, January," the giant said, sounding like an uncouth character concentrating on not saying please t'meetcha.

My snarl was purely animal as I slammed the door on him and turned back into the room. I stood there, swaying and holding my head for a minute.

"All right," I gave up. "Get out. I'll take a nice warm bath and bury myself in apple blossoms. Then you can bring me some grapefruit juice and radiate at me like a harvest moon. Only get this straight. I hate your old man. I hate him more every minute."

"That's all right," Paula said, going to the door and opening it. "I hate him too—sometimes."

Carl backed away far enough for her to get out. She flashed me a sympathetic smile. The door closed. I was alone. With the smell of apple blossoms. And my hate.

I took off my clothes and climbed into the tub. The temperature was just right. I sighed in reluctant contentment, splashing around a little to help the warmth soak in.

"What made you afraid, January?" Dr. Moriss' voice came from the doorway.

I catapulted to my feet, water cascading off my body over the edge of the tub onto the floor. Glaring at him I carefully stepped

out of the tub, my hands working in choking motions.

He watched me with that air of detached interest he would have used in observing the motions of a monkey in a zoo. I glared at him another moment, then turned my back on him, drying myself with the thick turkish towel.

"What made you afraid, January?" It was patient repetition, insistent and unemotional. A school teacher repeating a question to a stubborn pupil.

I ignored it. When I finished drying and turned to go out, he was gone.

There was a pitcher of bright red liquid with ice cubes floating in it on the table by the bed, and a glass of it already poured sitting beside it. I splashed it down my throat with loud swallows, struggled into the pajamas, and slid under the covers. It seemed only an instant later—

"What made you afraid, January?" When I opened my eyes the hand shaking my shoulder stopped. "What made you afraid, January?"

I stared without answering. Finally I closed my eyes to blot out that serene disinterested, hateful face. When I opened them again it was gone. I cursed with the vocabulary of the scum from New York to San Francisco. His psychological game was obvious, now. He hoped to wear me down, drive me to the point where I would tell him what I would never tell anyone, as the price of peace. He'd wake me

again as soon as I fell asleep. He'd wake me again and again and again. And again. . . .

"What made you afraid, January?"

"Go 'way," I murmured drowsily.

"What made you afraid, January? What made you afraid?"

NO one but an alcoholic could possibly know how I suffered. With every cell in my body crying out in agony the only relief was the unconsciousness of sleep. Sleep, that welcomed me only to toss me back into the hell of consciousness and that mad, unemotionally reiterated question.

"What made you afraid, January?"

I grew to hate every syllable, every unvarying intonation and inflection. I began to force myself to stay awake each time, scheming ways to murder Dr. Leopold Moriss.

I dreamed of him with his throat cut, going down, puffing unconcernedly on his cigar while his throat spurted out his life's blood. I dreamed of him falling to the sidewalk outside my window.

"What made you afraid, January?"

I dreamed I was raining blow after blow on his battered head while he sagged slowly to the floor, his face that of an unemotional, disinterested automaton.

"What made you afraid, January?"

I sucked in my breath. A moment later I heard the soft closing

of the door. I opened my eyes. The room was empty.

Slipping cautiously out of bed I took the pitcher of tomato juice to the bathroom and emptied it in the wash basin, then returned to bed with it, placing it under my pillows in such a way that I could bring it out and strike without warning.

"What made you afraid, January?"

I opened my eyes abruptly. The face above me bent closer suddenly, noting my new reaction.

My hand was around the handle of the heavy glass pitcher. I drew in a deep breath. With convulsive movement I struck, only to feel the pitcher caught and pulled from my fingers.

"I noticed it was gone," the doctor said calmly. "I'll get it filled again for you."

The door closed softly. I sobbed in angry frustration, in hopeless protest. In murderous hate, for I knew that Dr. Leopold Moriss' every move and every word were coldly calculated, directed toward one goal. To break me down.

"What made you afraid, January?"

My mind skidded through vast spaces to jar into its cradle of pain. I opened my eyes. There was a glass of red fluid hovering in front of my eyes, the doctor's fingers around it. I brought the back of my hand against where it had been. It had bobbed up so that I missed.

The action half turned me on my face.

I stayed that way. There was the careful sound of the glass being set on the table, the sound of the door closing. With a deep sigh I turned on my back again.

There must be a way out. There had to be a way out. All I had to do was think about it, if I could think through the torture of my body. One thing I knew: I would never tell him what he wanted to know. Not to escape a thousand years of torture.

I sat up and drank the glass of tomato juice. The empty glass slipped out of my fingers to the floor, landing with a dull thud on the rug. Getting out of bed, I went into the bathroom and washed my face in cold water.

There had to be a way out. Maybe I could tell him a lie that would satisfy him. But what lie would satisfy him? What, other than the truth, could satisfy him?

I looked in the bathroom mirror at my unshaven, tortured features, my bloodshot eyes, my rats-nest of uncombed hair. And slowly I saw a smile crease my lips, distorting my face. I knew a lie he would accept as the truth—if I played it right.

I had to play it right. Just as there was only one truth, there was only one lie he would accept as the truth. If I failed to make him accept it I was licked.

How does an actor play his part? He lives it, believes it. I had to

do that. I must keep repeating the lie in my mind, believing it, repeating it. Then I must *break down* in the way my torturer expected me to.

I snapped off the light in the bathroom and struggled back to bed.

WHEN I awoke, blinding white sunlight was bursting into the room from between half closed slats in the Venetian blinds, sending searing pain through my dehydrated eyes into my aching brain. A window was half open behind the blinds. A bird was singing just outside the window, its song a shrill, jarring discordance to my tortured eardrums.

I looked blankly around the room, feeling that something was missing. The sight of the pitcher with its red liquid, and the glass beside it, brought back memory. What was missing was Dr. Leopold Moriss standing over me asking his eternal question.

I cursed in a low mumble, hating him for even that. He had kept up his torture until I figured out something, and had ended it before I could put my plan into action. He was a dancing, taunting opponent who struck painful blows with ease, and danced out of reach when I found a way to fight back.

"Shut up!" I shouted at the bird, and felt a small sense of triumph when it obeyed.

Getting out of bed, I went to the door and opened it cautiously. There was no one outside. From

somewhere in the house came the all too familiar sound of Dr. Moriss' voice. It was interrupted by Paula's, raised angrily. I left my door open, sneaking along the hall to the head of the stairs, until I could make out what was being said.

". . . stop torturing him," Paula's voice came, angry and insistent.

"It's the only way, Paula," the doctor's voice said, as unperturbed as ever, even in the face of his daughter's obvious anger. "A fear that silences a man, makes him remain silent while his employers brand him a thief and blackball him from his profession, that drives him down the road to alcoholism, can't be broken down with kindness nor anything less than complete destruction of his ability to fight."

"It isn't human!" Paula's voice shot back. "If you keep it up I'll—I'll hate you as much as January does, even though you are my father."

"I won't have to keep it up much longer," her father replied, and for the first time I heard a note of human emotion in his tones. "When he breaks down and gets the load off his mind he'll get over the past few years and be himself again. I think you're half falling for him. It wouldn't be any good being married to an alcoholic who is incurable because he's hiding the thing that made him an alcoholic to begin with."

His next words shocked their way into my startled thoughts.

"But my motive isn't that humanitarian and you know it," he said, returning to his school-teacherish, lecturing voice. "I've repeated January's experiments. Out in my laboratory I have the completed and tested robot body exactly like my own, all ready for the transfer of my mind. I could go out there right this minute, and come in again in less than half an hour in that immortal mechanical body. But I don't dare to *until I find out what made January afraid.*"

My turbulent thoughts settled into a state of wondering confusion. If he had gone that far why didn't he know what had made me afraid? Could it be—? Suddenly I knew! He hadn't discovered that *one last refinement*. That was it! I felt like laughing. But my attention was jerked back to the conversation below.

"I don't care," Paula's voice said doggedly. "I don't care if you never finish. It's inhuman anyway—to discard the body you were born in and transfer the electronic pattern of your mind and consciousness to a mass of non-living colloid dielectric perched inside the head of a robot made of stainless steel bones, plastic muscles, and copper nerves. You've got to stop torturing January."

"I won't have to after a couple more hours," Dr. Moriss said. "I'm going to wake him up and get him to drink some of that tomato juice with a little seasoning in it designed to make him sicker than he is. A

few glasses of that and pounding my repeated question at him a few more times should do it."

I stole back to my room and grinned at the tomato juice. Did you ever put a jigsaw together and get a flash of insight that made the pieces fall into place suddenly, completing the puzzle almost by itself? That pitcher of tomato juice was the last piece. Everything fit, including that.

I would be able to tell my lie, and make Dr. Leopold Moriss believe it. Then—I would *help* him. My wild laughter burst into my ears. By an effort of will I shut it off and climbed back into bed, simulating sleep, my ears tuned for the first sound of the doctor's coming.

THE door opened. After a moment of suspense during which I kept my breathing slow and deep it closed softly. Padded footsteps came across the rug.

"January!" The doctor's voice was impersonal and insistent. His hand was gripped on my shoulder, shaking me. "Why were you afraid, January?"

I kept my eyes closed for a moment, mumbling protests. Inside I was laughing to myself, gloatingly. His voice was no longer torture. It was the senseless repetition of a parrot.

Suddenly it angered me. I opened my eyes, glaring, a corner of my mind thrilling to the beautiful

way my emotions were giving authenticity to my acting.

"Why are you afraid, January?" the doctor repeated, his calm face hovering above me.

I shoved his hand away, sneering at him, and sat up. The movement sent stabs of pain through my head. I gripped my head in my hands, groaning.

"Drink this," Dr. Moriss ordered.

I looked up. He was holding the glass of tomato juice toward me, the tomato juice containing something to make me sicker. I felt the sneering smile distort the sensitive skin of my face as I reached out deliberately and took the glass from him. I looked into his dead eyes while I lifted it to my lips. Then I drank it.

I set the empty glass down on the stand.

"Get out!" I rasped. "Leave me alone."

"What made you afraid, January?"

Suddenly nausea gripped me. Blindly I struggled out of bed to the bathroom. As I went I felt a bitter laughter welling up silently in my mind.

"What made you afraid, January?"

I was retching. That was genuine. I clamped my hands over my ears. That was acting, because Dr. Leopold Moriss had lost his power to torture me.

"What made you afraid, January?"

With an animal snarl I straightened and turned on him, my eyes blinded with tears produced by the retching, my chin wet with vomit. He caught my flailing arms easily, folding them over my chest and pinning me against the wall.

"What made you afraid, January?"

I began to cry. It was an act, but my condition made anything resembling crying come out authentic.

I felt his hands drop from my arms. Still blubbering as though completely broken, I slid slowly to the tile floor, letting my head drop.

"All right, I'll tell you," I said weakly. A chill shudder shook my body. I buried my face in my arms resting on my knees.

"No, January!" It was Paula's voice. My head jerked upright. She was standing in the doorway, the living image of anger. The doctor had turned toward her, irritation showing on his face. "Dad," she said, her eyes flashing blue fire at him, "if you don't stop I'll get the police."

Alarm coursed through me. She was endangering my plan. I dropped my head back in the cradle of my arms to hide my expression.

"Paula!" the doctor was saying in exasperation. "Leave us——"

"I was afraid," I cut in, making my voice sound utterly listless and defeated, "of what I knew I would do unless I stopped my experiments

and destroyed them.

"I had transferred the mind of a dog into a robot duplicate of its own body. The dog was a pet. It didn't know it was no longer in its own body, the body that had died when the mind pattern in the brain was lifted out and transplanted into the colloidal dielectric brain. It didn't know what had happened, so although it was often puzzled by things, it didn't mind.

"But I knew what the next step would be!" I lifted my head and stared at the doctor, avoiding Paula's eyes. They were standing there, holding their breath, waiting for my next words. I let my head drop into concealment in my arms again.

"The next step would be a robot body for myself," I said mechanically, tonelessly. "I would build it and enter it. And I would never be able to re-enter my normal body, because it would die in the transfer. I would be immortal—but at an awful price. The price of normal life, loving, being loved, and someday getting married and having children—and a mother for those children.

"And yet I knew that I would build that robot body and transfer my mind to it—if I kept on. So I destroyed my work, my reputation, my ability to earn the kind of money it would take to do what I didn't have the will not to do, if I could."

I looked up cautiously, my face lax, my eyes half veiled, to see how they were taking what I was say-

ing. Paula's face was a mask of pity and sympathy. Her father's was one of fixed attention and belief. I dropped my head again and muffled my voice.

"Pepper—my dog—not comprehending what was wrong with him, grew more and more bewildered. He got run over a month later. It couldn't kill him, but it wrecked his robot frame. I smashed his colloid brain and buried him to put his immortal mind out of its bewildering confused—existence."

"But—" It was Dr. Moriss' voice, full of growing, pleased conviction. "Then there was nothing you discovered other than what I've already discovered and tried?"

"No," I lied. And he believed me.

THE hours passed swiftly, with long gaps during which I slept, unconscious of the conflict of hunger and alcohol starvation being fought in every cell of my body. The sunlight through the lattice-work of the Venetian blinds became a pleasant and welcome warmth. The song of the persistent bird outside the window grew joyful, and something I missed when it didn't come for a long time.

Paula sat on the edge of the bed and washed my face and ran an electric razor over it while I basked in the pleasant rays from her deep blue eyes. She fed me tall glasses of tomato juice spiked only with grapefruit juice, and with cool, clinking ice cubes that caressed my

fevered lips. . . .

"You're looking much better this morning, January," she said, leaning back and inspecting her handiwork with the shaver. "Feel up to trying a scrambled egg fried in butter, with golden brown toast and nice crisp bacon?"

"And make the coffee black — and hot," I said.

"Yes, sir," she said in mock subservience.

She had her breakfast with me. The fluffy scrambled eggs and warm toast began to nestle comfortably in my stomach, and Paula nestled comfortably on the edge of the bed sipping her coffee, her hair radiant flows of rich browns and mahoganies capturing and transmitting the sunlight from the window.

Her red lips parted to reveal gleaming white teeth when she laughed intimately, happily, at my running humor. I relaxed, my mind at ease, Dr. Leopold Moriss momentarily forgotten. . . .

She displayed my suit proudly on its coat hanger, freshly cleaned and pressed, the stack of four new shirts still in their cellophane wrappers. I watched her retreat from the room with something inside me, my heart perhaps, hurting.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror putting a knot in the tie. It had been a long time since I'd had a choice of ties, ten of them. I inspected it in the glass. Then the realization that it wasn't a new tie rose to consciousness. It was Dr. Moriss'.

I tore it off, ripping the collar of the shirt in my anger. I stood there, panting with emotion. My purpose was back! Slowly, like the flames of a charcoal fire fanned by a gust of wind, the fire of hate in my eyes died down, leaving only the glowing coals, which would be unnoticed behind the mask of a smile.

I practiced that smile while I put on another shirt and knotted another of Dr. Leopold Moriss' ties about my neck. I had played enough poker in penny ante dives up and down the west coast during my wanderings to perfect the lazy unrevealing poker smile.

There was a knock. Paula's voice sounded. "Are you dressed?"

"Come in!" I called.

Her eyes literally bathed me with admiration. She let the door slam behind her without hearing it.

"That's right!" I said. "You've never seen me before when I looked like a decent human being."

"Oh, I have too," she retorted.

"Do I look anything like you thought I would?"

"That's just it," she said. "You look *exactly* like I dr— hoped you would." Then, like she was snapping out of a dream, "Dad wants you downstairs. That is, he said to tell you he would like you to drop into the study if you want to, but also to tell you you don't have to. You're free to come and go as you please. He said expressly to tell you that." She stopped breathlessly, the dreamy stare coming back into her eyes.

"Why, sure," I said. "I guess I won't mind dropping into his study — too much." I grinned. "Though I'd much rather ignore him and go out someplace with you."

"That's a date," she said softly, wrinkling her nose at me, "after you see dad."

We tripped lightly down the stairs hand in hand as if we had done it hundreds of times before.

"That the door?" I asked, looking at the one she had ushered me through when I had first arrived.

"Yes," she said.

I gently disengaged her hand and tapped her cheek with my fingers. Suddenly I took her chin between my fingers and tilted her face up. She looked gravely into my eyes. I bent to kiss her. Her red lips curved to meet mine. . . .

"You stay out here," I said gruffly.

I turned to the door. My hand touched it, hesitated, then twisted the knob. On my face was the smile I had practiced.

DR. Leopold Moriss was sitting as I had left him so long ago, puffing contentedly on a long black cigar, his dead eyes staring expressionlessly through the haze and streamers of blue smoke. I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. Its click seemed to be the spring that brought him to life.

"Well, January," he said like a school teacher welcoming a child who has been down with the mumps,

"you're looking better." He nodded. "Much better. I hope you feel better, too." He shot me a questioning look.

"Yes sir," I said.

"Nothing like getting rid of something," he said. "Getting it off your chest so you can forget it—but that isn't what I wanted to see you about." He leaned forward suddenly. "Is that lipstick?" he asked.

"No, tomato juice," I said dryly. He chuckled while I wiped it off.

"I'd like you to go over my research with me," he said, reverting abruptly to his school teacher voice. "You're the only living man who knows anything about it other than me. You'd like that?" He looked almost pleading.

"All right," I said, shrugging indifferently.

"Not exactly keen about it?" he said, chuckling again. "After what you told me I don't blame you. But it'll be good therapy, and with Paula in the background I don't believe you'll have any trouble resisting the temptation to gain immortality in a non-living robot."

"Maybe you're right," I said.

"With me it's different," he went on enthusiastically, paying little attention to my comment. "I'm getting on in years. My wife has been gone long enough so that she's just a memory. Paula is grown up. There's nothing to keep me from making the jump. Of course, I get a rather peculiar feeling every time I think of actually taking this step,

and waking up to find my original body lying there on the other table, dead. But it doesn't alter the milk to pour it into another bottle. And from my experiments with dogs there doesn't seem to be any sensation accompanying the process of transfer. As a matter of fact, with one dog I teased him with a juicy bone up to the instant of transfer. The first thing he did in the robot body was look around for the bone. Rapid as the flicker of a film."

"Yes, I know," I said dryly. "I found the same thing. No consciousness of transfer or any other sensation. With the scanner-transferer it takes place in less than a ten thousandth of a second. Every electrical pattern of the brain complex is lifted out as an infinitesimal segment and transplanted into the colloid dielectric complex without alteration."

"Like a television eye scans a scene, in a way," the doctor added. "But let's go out to my laboratory. I'll show you *my body*."

He laughed at the remark as he stood up and went to the door.

My hands were trembling visibly. I hid them in my pockets, gripping them into tight fists to stop their trembling. I followed him into the hall, holding onto my appearance of calm detachment with every ounce of my will. The doctor had not yet found out what had made me afraid. But he would. He'd find out when I was ready for him to.

"We're going out to the lab, Paula," Dr. Moriss was saying.

"Oh," Paula said, disappointment in her tone.

"Wait a minute, Dr. Moriss," I said. "Paula and I are going out for a walk first."

"That can wait a half hour," he said. "I just want to show you—my body." He chuckled.

"It can't wait," I said, "and even if it could I want a breath of fresh air before going into that lab."

"He's been sick for three days without being out," Paula said. "Stop being so selfish, dad."

"That's unkind, Paula," Dr. Moriss said, "but go ahead." He turned back into his study.

WE walked along sidewalks hand in hand, with kids playing catch and hop-skip as hazards, and shapeless, harrassed women struggling home with overloaded shopping bags.

We heard the dying wail of sirens and saw a crowd at a corner, and joined it to watch the callous internes lift a screaming woman onto a stretcher while she repeated, "Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh God," over and over, and a white faced teen age boy kept repeating to an unsympathetic but silent police officer, "I didn't see her. I didn't see her. I didn't see her."

We had coffee and hamburgers in a smelly, ten stool hole-in-the-wall served by a jovial, potbellied cook-and-waiter who sweated olive oil profusely over a dirty griddle,

while his cracked jukebox blared out music from cracked records—and looked at each other and laughed when we couldn't talk above the noise.

On impulse we climbed aboard a streetcar just as it was starting up, and grinned at the conductor when he yelled above the noise, "Watch it. Wanta get killed?" And sat very close together while the ancient monument to a past civilization thundered on, on what promised to be its last trip.

And we got off and pretended we were lost. We went into pawnshops and looked at second hand diamond rings, whose fires were dimmed by the grimy sweat of the pawnbroker's fingers and the secret knowledge they held within their secret carbon heart of broken romances and marriages, and poverty that had led their former owners here to exchange a dream that had shattered for a week's rent in a fourth rate hotel.

We bought a newspaper from a blind man, and had a coke in a corner drugstore while we read it and worried about the world situation, and a gaunt thing with brown bags under her eyes told the patient druggist all her symptoms in a whining monotone.

We looked in windows at fur coats marked down from four hundred and ninety-nine ninety-five. We bought a sack of popcorn in an automatic vending machine that cheated on the amount, and fought over it until it skidded out of our

hands onto the sidewalk. We had our picture taken together in a twenty-five cent booth, pretending to each other it wasn't so we could sit with our heads together.

When our feet grew reluctant we looked about us and discovered we were back home, and wondered with real surprise how that had happened, and how our feet had known without us knowing.

I half turned to retreat, feeling a panic and a sense of having left something undone or unsaid that should have been said. Paula was looking at me, her eyes troubled, and suddenly I knew she felt the same way, only there was a basic difference. She was holding back her feelings about her father shuffling off his mortal body for an imperishable one of non-living matter. And I? The thought fled fearfully into my subconscious. There could be no turning back, whatever the price.

I took Paula's hand, patted the side of her face until her smile brightened again. Hand in hand we slowly walked toward the house, our eyes on the drawn curtains of the study window behind which waited a man whom I had grown to hate even more than I loved his daughter.

THE laboratory was a two story building in back of the house, reached by a narrow sidewalk in the grudging space the builders had left between the two. I paused at the door after the doctor had opened

it and gone in. Paula was still at the kitchen door where we had left her, her eyes round with unvoiced protest and mute appeal.

"Are you coming?" the doctor's voice protested my delay.

"O.K.," I said, stepping inside and closing the door.

Our feet rang hollowly on the wood floor as we crossed a conventional chemical laboratory to steps leading upward. The doctor's face was flushed with excitement and eagerness. His footsteps were light on the stairs, light and swift. My own were heavy and slow behind him, each hollow blow the beat of a devil drum in some voodoo jungle as my thoughts rushed back over the lifetime I had crowded into the past three years, to prepare me for what I would see.

"There it is," the doctor said as I reached the last step and paused.

I saw the trim panel of the transfer machine, the two leather upholstered tables. But they were no more than background impressions as my eyes fixed on the form lying full length on one of those two tables.

If Dr. Leopold Moriss had not been standing beside me I would have sworn it was him — or his corpse. Unconsciously my feet carried me forward and to one side where I could look down at that face of carefully molded synthetic rubber, tinted the exact shade of the doctor's living flesh, the open unblinking eyes with irises the same pale blue. And blue-veined hands

that seemed to have died just the moment before.

"Color photography," the doctor was explaining. "The sensitized chemicals impregnated in the rubberoid, and the color image of my own flesh imprinted in it from a projector."

"As authentic as a counterfeit ten dollar bill," I wisecracked tonelessly. "Even to the clothes and shoes!"

"Exactly," Dr. Moriss said, laughing gleefully. "Take a look at the insides of the transferer and see if it looks familiar to you. I built it so the circuits are all exposed and easy to follow. Different colored wires."

I stepped around the duplicate of the doctor on the table, something inside me crawling frantically, and unfastened the back of the cabinet, exposing the circuit. Skills that had not dimmed and would never dim took control of my sight and traced each element of the circuit, comparing it with that which I myself had built—and destroyed. . . .

The drops of solder that held wires in contact glistened dully — silver blobs dotting orderly geometrical designs composed of blue, yellow, green, orange, and too many other colors to count. Little cylinders that were condensers and resistors and tubes and coils.

My mind clicked off one detail after another. It was my circuit. I might have built it myself. But I had destroyed everything except what I carried in my mind. Dr. Leo-

pold Moriss had repeated my discoveries step by step. Reason had followed the path I had destroyed, just as surely as the instinct of an insect makes it live the life pattern of its ancestors down to the finest detail.

"Does it check?" The doctor asked.

I looked at one particular blob of solder connecting a blue coated wire with a red one, and nodded.

"Yes," I said carefully.

"How about the hoods?" he asked.

I quickly examined the hoods, heavy things on maneuverable frames. They could almost have been cast from the same mold.

"They're O.K.," I said.

"Then I want to get it over with now," Dr. Moriss said.

"What!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. Now," he said. "The sooner the better. Paula isn't expecting me to do it this way."

I took a deep breath. My eyes studied the straps to be buckled around the robot in such a way that it could only release itself when it became activated by a calm intelligence, and the straps fastened into the vacant table that could be buckled and unbuckled the same way, that would keep the body from throwing itself around violently under the wild play of neutral forces set loose as the mind was plucked from the living brain.

"All right," I said, my voice sounding queer and remote to me. "Lie down and I'll strap you up."

As he climbed onto the vacant table my eyes searched the room frantically for something *to cut the connection between that blue and that red wire.*

"I'M ready," the doctor said, relaxing on the table with no more apparent concern than a man getting into a barber chair for a shave.

I buckled the straps with fumbling fingers, my thoughts racing. There was not a tool in sight anywhere. Nothing that could cut that wire.

"We forgot to warm up the tubes!" Dr. Moriss exclaimed.

"You aren't as calm as you pretend to be," I chided, hiding the thrill of triumph that rose in me. "As soon as I finish buckling the straps on you and your future receptacle I'll warm up the circuit."

"Thanks, January," he said with relief.

I finished with him and went to the robot, the robot so soon to be activated with the doctor's intelligence. I buckled the straps about its inert form exactly the way I had done with the living.

"Why don't you turn the current on before doing that?" Dr. Moriss asked.

I smiled at him slowly. "Plenty of time," I said.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked. His eyes were suddenly sharp with suspicion.

"Oh, nothing," I said, shrugging.

"A minute won't make a big difference will it?"

He studied me closely. My heart was beating against my ribs.

"I've changed my mind," he said abruptly, his fingers fumbling with the buckle that would release his arms. "I'll wait until later to do this."

"No you don't!" I said, my calm deserting me. I leaped around the tables. His fingers were trying desperately to open the buckle that would free his arms. I slapped them away and stood over him.

"This is for those hours of torture," I said, leering into his blank eyes. My fist crashed against the side of his jaw just in front of the ear. He sank back, limp and unconscious.

It was better this way. I was glad it had happened. Now I could be sure of what I did. I crossed the room to a bench and searched swiftly through drawers of tools until I found a wire cutter. In a moment I had clipped the blue coated wire where it was soldered to the red one. Quickly, with sure movements, I fastened the cover back on the case, threw the switch that sent electric current glowing through the cold filaments of tubes, and returned the wire clipper to its drawer. And by the time I had adjusted the two hoods into position over Dr. Leopold Moriss' head and that of the waiting robot form, the meters on the instrument panel showed that everything was ready for the final moment. The moment I had been

looking forward to, working toward; when I could touch the switch that would begin the final act, completing my revenge.

My breathing was the only sound in the room as I stood for a moment surveying everything to be sure. I grinned into the doctor's closed eyes. It was too bad now that he wasn't conscious so that I could watch his fear and horror, so that he could know before I jabbed down on that switch what he had tortured me to discover.

ALL the hate that had built up in my soul went into that final act. I heard the faint click as the switch snapped over to contact. A horrible scream welled from the throat of the unconscious man as I ran to the stairs and stumbled down them.

I waited in the chemical lab, knowing that Paula would be watching the door of the building, and not wanting to face her until it was all finished. I was waiting for the sound of footsteps over my head. Slow steps that would cross and come down the stairs.

And finally I heard them. I watched the stairs and saw first the legs and then the rest of the man that was descending. It was the robot, controlled by the mind of Dr. Leopold Moriss. There was no hostility in its expression as its eyes settled on me. Rather, there was grave respect. It stopped in front of me, its movements so natural and smooth that no one could

have guessed it was a non-living robot. I returned its studied gaze in silence. Then it went on past me to the door. I watched without moving as the door closed.

"Dad!" It was Paula's voice. "Tell January to come in here. Lunch's ready. Dad!" Her voice was full of sudden alarm. "Dad!" Then, "January!" Her feet pounded on the back steps and the narrow sidewalk outside. The knob rattled as she fumbled, then the door burst open and she stood framed there, her eyes wide with fear and horror and a half realization of what her mind was not conditioned to quite accept.

She saw me, and with a sob of relief she was across the room and in my arms. I held her head against the cradle of my neck, waiting.

And then it came.

Over our heads sounded a faint scuffle of a shoe, a hesitant foot-step, another, and then another, dragging, stumbling.

Paula's trembling body stiffened at the first sound. She looked up at me in numb unbelief, then wonder, seeing in my expression, my eyes, the culmination of my revenge. She started to pull away, to run toward the stairs.

"No!" I said softly. "Wait. He deserved this."

The defiance left her. She stood beside me while we both waited.

Feet came into view. Legs. Hands sliding weakly along the wall for support. A face bearing the shocked realization that another mind existed in the world identical with itself. A realization of the fallacy of believing that by destroying oneself at the instant of creation of that other mind it would in some absolute way *become* oneself.

As I looked at him standing there on the stairs the hate that I had nurtured disappeared. In its place was pity and sympathy.

I was up the stairs catching him before he could fall, lifting him, surprised at his lightness. Paula, her lips trembling on a hesitant worried smile, was opening doors ahead of me as I carried her father into the house and laid him on his bed.

And as Paula and I undressed him to treat the bruises caused by the straps, in my mind rose a picture of the other Dr. Leopold Moriss, the robot, hurrying along some street and, perhaps, already making plans to search for — the other January Stevens.

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CLEAR CHANNEL ONE!

THE nervous system of an animal or a human being has often been compared with a telephone exchange. Electrical impulses are common to both and though relays operate in the latter, the analogy is surprisingly close. Wiener's cybernetics draws the analogy even tighter. We are surprisingly like electrical apparatus!

And every discovery that the physiologists make seems to further confirm this. In many electrical circuits, particularly in radar and TV, as well as in telephone work, it is often necessary to "clear a channel" by shooting an electrical impulse into it. This opens or closes suitable relays permitting a com-

pletely clear unhampered path for the subsequent following signal.

Well, the physiologists have discovered that in the animal nervous system—and presumably human—a similar reaction takes place. In any nervous reaction a slower pulse is followed a short while later by a rapid one, much as if the former had cleared the channel for the latter! Measured time-rates show that this effect is common. Before understanding the mechanism of the exchange, scientists had thought merely that the nervous impulse speeded up. This is not the case however. Separate distinct pulses follow one after the other, "A clearing for B!"

BRAIN WAVES AND MURDER!

AT the present time the legal definitions of sanity and insanity are strangely obscure. It is impossible apparently for a man to be labeled one or the other without an exhaustive analysis—usually following a crime. In fact it appears that the criminal act is first the clue to insanity. Psychiatrists and psychologists have not been able to arrive at any positive definition.

It may be that the final word will come from the physical laboratories. Already the ingenious instrument known as the encephalograph, which is capable of showing on an oscilloscope, pictures of the brain waves of a human subject, is providing a possible answer to the dilemma.

The electroencephalograph is essentially a very powerful radio amplifier with sensitive pick-up coils which are capable of detecting the minute electrical pulsations which go

through our brains at all times. From a study of these pictures, in conjunction with a knowledge of the psychological history of the subject, it appears as if we'll be able to make some sort of a chart or list of those whose brain-waves are proof of serious mental disorder.

Such a list would serve to check on potential criminals and enable medical men to react swiftly and effectively. Unfortunately as yet not enough is known to compile such a list, but the clues are there. British scientists examining the brains of murderers and normal people have discovered that there is a correlation between their activities and their brain waves above and beyond that of simple guilt or disturbance.

Should this prove satisfactory we can expect that among the first tests anyone will receive—say, in applying for a job—will be electroencephalographic analysis.

LOOK TO THE STARS

By Willard Hawkins



The sky is filled with lonely stones—planets waiting for the first breath of life to warm them. N'urth was such a world—and the Gods smiled on it.

TELL me, my queen mother, the story of the gods."

"Do you never tire, son, of those ancient legends? But no—let this not seem a reproof. It is well that a prince of the royal line should ponder much on those mighty ones, who came from the sun, where dwells El-Leighi, the source of all, to create a fair world—the world in which some day you will reign. Shall I speak, then, of Solin-Ga-Ling, patron of husbandry and Lord of the North, or would you hear of the gentle Maha-Bar-Astro, sweet goddess who fashions the

dreams of childhood? Or would you know of the mysterious Noor-Ah-Mah, who died twice, lived thrice, and was both male and female by turns?"

"Tell me of them all; but first, mother, who was the mightiest of the gods?"

"Hush, child! Among beings so exalted it would be presumptuous for mortals to regard one above the other. But know this—for it concerns you and your pride of race: Splendid legends relate to the strength and virtues of Maha-Ra-Lin, Lord of the South, sometimes called the Life-giver. For it was



he who created Noor-Ah-Mah from a rock by the sea, and breathed his own life into her nostrils."

"But, mother, was he not defeated in battle?"

"It was a battle beyond our understanding—of forces that we cannot comprehend, and for a purpose beyond our knowledge—though it is said that in some manner the strife arose over the sex to be awarded the newly created Noor-Ah-Mah. Maha-Ra-Lin would have endowed the partly formed being with the attributes of a god, but Bar-Doo-Chan, Lord of the West, contended

for a goddess. In their mighty clash of wills, the heavens were rent with lightning, the seas were churned, mountains were heaved by the all-powerful ones across the land. Legend has it that a single moon shone from the heavens before that event, but a lightning bolt hurled by Maha-Ra-Lin at his antagonist failed of its mark. It smote the moon by chance, splitting the heavenly body in twain, so that two

moons now circle the continents of N'urth."

"Then Bar-Doo-Chan, who defeated Maha-Ra-Lin, was the mightiest."

"Nay, that you must not say. True, at the end of three days Maha-Ra-Lin acknowledged himself defeated. Yet it is written that he nobly abandoned the fray out of pity for the helpless creatures of N'urth, and for the newly created Noor-Ah-Mah, knowing that if the battle continued they would all be destroyed. And so Noor-Ah-Mah became a goddess, and in that aspect she is depicted by our sculptors as a mighty huntress, running with upraised spear cheek-by-cheek with Bar-Doo-Chan. But Maha-Ra-Lin, the Life-giver, could not wholly undo his original design, so that at times she reverted to the form of a male. That is why, in ancient carvings, we sometimes find Noor-Ah-Mah pictured as a god, carrying lightnings of destruction in his clenched hand."

"Then, after all, Maha-Ra-Lin was the greatest?"

"He was a mighty being, son. Yet how can any be considered greater than Pi-Ruh-Al, to whom even the other gods and goddesses turned for counsel? Pi-Ruh-Al, the great mother, goddess of beauty, of wisdom, creator of mortal life . . ."

CHAPTER I

THE rain settled into a steady downpour. Drenched to the

marrow, Dave Marlin struggled on through the darkness and mire. At times he stumbled away from the wagon trail and floundered through sodden verdure that tangled his feet, clutched with slimy tendrils at his clothing, or lashed his face. Occasionally he stopped to curse the road, the darkness, the storm; again to heap maledictions on the truck driver who had dumped him off on this byway to nowhere.

He should have kept to the paved highway. A light blinking through the rain, seemingly not far up the mountainside, had lured his feet. It had long since been lost to view, yet he struggled on. The trail surely must lead somewhere, even if only to a deserted sawmill or mine shaft.

His feet slipped and he went down cursing. As he struggled out of the puddle, gouging grit and slime from eyes and nostrils, he became aware of a deeper black looming ahead.

It was the rear of an old-style open roadster. Through the swish of waters his ears caught the sound of hammering on metal.

Feeling his way along the side, he came to a man who was muttering to himself with bitter emphasis while doing things to the engine under the upraised hood.

"Trouble, buddie?" demanded Marlin.

The other jerked up his head so suddenly that it struck the hood. He snarled an epithet; then: "Who the devil?"

"Just a wayfarer," Marlin an-

swered. "Just a wayfarer, buddie, out for a stroll on this beautiful moonlit evening."

"Lay off the comedy!" snarled the other, again diving under the hood. "And get goin' if you can't help."

"Why don't you turn on the lights?"

"Because she ain't got no lights—that's why."

"Battery dead?" asked Marlin. Receiving no answer, he edged back to the instrument panel. As he started searching beneath it for possible ends of disconnected wires, he became aware of a squirming movement under the hand which rested on the seat.

"Take your paws off me, you slimy fish!" came a tense feminine voice. When he made no move to comply, the figure which had been slumped down in the seat became a sudden bundle of fury.

"Easy, sister!" he protested, deftly capturing the small hands in his muscular grasp. "No use getting excite—" He paused. "What's this? Iron bracelets?"

The other man slished toward him threateningly. "Get out of what ain't none of your business!" he snapped. "You was headin' up the road. Just keep goin'—and you'll stay outa trouble."

Marlin felt the slender wrists grow tense within his grasp. The short length of chain connecting the handcuffs tinkled.

"Sorry, bo," he said softly. "The lady's jewelry intrigues me."

A hard object pressed sharply in to his side. "Scram!"

With panther-like quickness, Marlin twisted. The gun barked as his arm knocked it away. Then the two were down in the sodden grass, flailing and squirming for advantage.

Either because he was the stronger or because luck favored him in the slippery rough-and-tumble, Marlin arose with the automatic in his possession.

"This", he commented, "is better. I've never been good at taking orders." He considered a moment. "If the car won't start, it won't. That leaves two courses open to us. We can sit and wait till some one comes along—which isn't likely—or we can hoof it until we come to something better. I saw a light up beyond."

"I'm tired of sitting in the car," the girl put in. "Anything's better than freezing here."

"Maybe you don't know, smart guy," her companion growled, "that you're tangling with the law." He tapped his chest.

"Detective—eh?"

"Yeah," the girl cut in, "and don't forget to tell him about your phony stunt—kidnaping me across the state line without extradition papers."

Marlin studied them for a moment. He had no desire to run up against the law. But if this officer was out of his jurisdiction—

"I get it," he said. "You're pull-

ing something shady—that's why you tried to make it on this back trail. All right, brother—take off the jewelry."

Grudgingly, the detective removed the handcuffs.

"Try any funny stuff," he observed, "and it'll go hard with the both of you. This is Sally Camino," he informed Marlin. "Wanted for workin' a con game. I can turn her over to the authorities here if I have to. Won't be no trouble to get extradition papers. I'm just tryin' to save the state money."

"What's your name?" demanded Marlin.

"Len McGruder. What you so nosey for?"

"Just getting acquainted. Mine's Dave Marlin. Come on, Sal. Any baggage?"

"This jerk wouldn't even give me a chance to pack a toothbrush," she returned vindictively.

Fortunately, she was dressed in slacks. After a futile attempt to negotiate the mud in her high-heeled shoes, she left them sticking in the ooze.

"I'll take it barefooted," she observed philosophically.

Less from chivalry than curiosity, Marlin helped her when she stumbled and assisted her over the deeper puddles. He decided, in the process, that she was firm-fleshed and well-formed. After the first few yards she refused his help.

"Keep your muddy paws off of me!" she snapped. "You too!" as McGruder attempted to thrust his

bulk between them.

They plodded on through the mud and drizzle. The road climbed upward at an agonizing grade. Marlin no longer cursed. In the presence of companions in misery, he became tauntingly ironical. It was they who were buffeted and tormented—he was the strong man, unaffected by the elements, able to "take it."

"We shoulda stayed in the car," growled McGruder.

"Only room for two of us," returned Marlin. "Want to go back with me, Sal?"

"Not if I know what I'm doing!" the girl snapped, brushing a lock of wet hair out of her eyes.

Topping a steep rise, they came unexpectedly upon the shelter.

CHAPTER II

A light gleamed feebly through a small window. Closer approach revealed that it was set in a wall which formed the front of a dwelling partly extending back into the cliff.

They pressed their faces against the dripping pane. Beside a fireplace in which a few dying embers glowed faintly, a robust man with a flowing beard was nodding over a book. A kerosene lamp flickered on the table beside him.

They felt along the wall for a door and rapped. After a moment, it opened. The beard was thrust forward and the man behind it stood regarding them from beneath bushy eyebrows.

"We're lost," began Marlin. "What's the chance—?"

"Eh?" the bearded man craned his neck, peering beyond them. "So you're the ones we've been waiting for. Where's the other?"

"There's only the three of us."

With a slightly puzzled manner, he allowed them to enter. Marlin crossed to the fireplace. "Mind if I build this up?"

Not waiting for a reply, he heaped on chunks of pine log from the half-filled woodbox and soon had a rousing fire. McGruder and the girl knelt gratefully in front of the blaze—the girl shivering. Not bad, Marlin decided, at his first sidelong glimpse of her face—or wouldn't be, when her wet hair was fixed up. Then he growled at himself and abruptly turned away.

Their host stood with folded arms, surveying the mud-smeared trio with evident distaste. Experiencing a vague sense of alien presences, Marlin suddenly whirled, his hand clutching at the pocket in which McGruder's automatic reposed.

A door, apparently leading to the interior of the mountain, was partly open. Peering from the narrow aperture were three curiously repellent faces and one of singular beauty.

Sally and the detective, crouching before the fire, turned at his smothered exclamation. The three faced the barrage of eyes in silence until the bearded man gestured peremptorily.

"Shut the door," he ordered.

"Come in if you must."

As they trooped into the room, Marlin caught a glimpse of a dark passageway. The unmistakable earthy smell of a mine shaft or tunnel reached his nostrils.

They were a nondescript group. At first glance, three of the newcomers had appeared to be men. Marlin saw now that one was a woman. She had a bulbous nose, bleary red eyes, and a scar that twisted one corner of her mouth into the semblance of a grin. Her gaunt figure was swathed in a dingy robe.

One of the men was powerful and well-knit—he looked to be a match for Marlin himself. The other was wizened and under-sized, with a shrewd, weasel face. Strands of greasy hair overhung his eyes, forcing him to cock his head like a poodle in order to see. Both men had made shift to pull their trousers over their underwear before putting in an appearance.

In contrast to these was the fourth—a girl of perhaps eighteen with a sweetly innocent face framed in a shimmering halo of golden hair. In her long white robe she was a vision of ethereal loveliness. The eyes of Marlin and McGruder instinctively fastened upon her.

The woman with the twisted grin cackled. "Look your fill, smarties, for that's all you'll get. Pearl ain't for the likes of you, so don't get ideas."

The weasel-faced man sidled forward, extending a clammy hand.

"Wukkum to our dump," he said ingratiatingly. "Meet the gang. My name's Link—Percival B. Link for the blotter, Slinky Link to my frien's." He jerked a thumb toward the woman. "Maw Barstow. This overgrown hunk of meat is Bart DuChane, alias Chaney the Great. Just finished doing a stretch for manslaughter. Oughta stuck to his crystal gazing."

The eyes of the man thus introduced glittered venomously, but his lips forced a smile. He spoke in a controlled voice.

"I might suggest that people who discuss others too freely sometimes meet with accidents."

Marlin studied him with a sense of taking the measure of an adversary. "My name is Dave Marlin," he acknowledged.

"Who's your frien's?" demanded Link.

The detective replied, nodding toward the girl who had worn the handcuffs. "Sally Camino—slick-est floozie in the con-game racket. My name's McGruder. D. A.'s office," he added significantly.

Link peered through his thatch of hair. "McGruder," he said reflectively. "Ain't you the Len McGruder that was kicked off the force in Columbus for hijacking? Sure! I know you!"

Marlin swung on the detective. "You're no law officer," he said. "Let's see that badge."

"Keep your hands offa me!" the detective snarled, clutching his coat.

Sally Camino faced him in sud-

den fury. "You rat!" she spat at him. "You're an even bigger phony than I guessed. Taking me across the state line so's you could put the screws on the gang. Well, let me tell you, fake copper, when Briscoe hears of this——"

"You one of the Briscoe mob?" demanded Link. "Why I was pract'ly lined up with Briscoe—before I got sent up the last time. It's a small world, ain't it?"

The girl glanced at him with repugnance. "Yeah? That just about makes us pals, don't it?"

The irony was wasted. "Sure does," he grinned.

"How about her?" McGruder indicated the golden-haired girl.

"That's Pearl," explained Link. "She ain't all there."

"A lot you know about it!" retorted Maw Barstow. "Pearlie's brighter than you think. Is these the ones that was comin', dearie?" she demanded.

The girl's lips parted in a beatific smile.

"Has vishuns," explained Link. He tapped his forehead to indicate a mysterious form of mental activity. "The old guy—he's nuts too."

This confidence was imparted in a lowered voice, but hardly low enough to avoid being overheard.

"Who is he?" demanded McGruder.

"The name," responded the vibrant voice of the bearded man, "is Elias Thornboldt. And your informant is perfectly correct when he assures you that I am crazy."

The newcomers stared.

"What of it!" Thornboldt demanded, his voice rising in pitch. "I have brains, even if they are addled. I have respectability. I should associate with scientists—decent citizens—instead of scum. Thieves, murderers, pickpockets, harlots—you are not nice people, not any of you!"

He glared at the group as if challenging denial.

"With my brains," he went on, breathing heavily, "I should create a wonderful space ship—instead of a monstrosity that was never intended on heaven or earth. Fortunately, I know I am mad. The rest of you do not know what vermin you are!"

Marlin felt a hand plucking at his sleeve. He glanced down to meet the eyes of Link peering through strands of dank hair.

"We better ooze out," the creature said. "When the old gink gets started like that he'll keep it up all night."

The passage, as Marlin had surmised, was a tunnel through the rock. Bart DuChane led the way with a flashlight. A narrow plank walk marked its length for something like a hundred feet. They emerged on what seemed to be a ledge of the open mountainside. The rain was still pouring, but an outcropping overhead partly protected the ledge. Across the way, a rim of tall pines could be discerned against the murky sky.

"It's the hollow of an ancient

crater," DuChane volunteered. "That dark mass in the pit below—but why spoil your anticipation? Tomorrow you'll see for yourselves." He laughed unpleasantly. "These are the bunkhouses—ladies to the left, men to the right. Maw is a stickler for the proprieties."

They entered a narrow shack—apparently one of several along the ledge. There were two lower and two upper bunks. Since the lower had been appropriated by DuChane and Link, the late comers climbed into the upper tier.

"Looks almost as if they was expecting us—or somebody," commented McGruder. "The old goof sorta hinted——"

"They were," chuckled DuChane. "You'd be surprised."

CHAPTER III

DAVE Marlin stood on the ledge in the chill air of early morning, looking into the sodden depths below. The rain had ceased, but the rays of the newly risen sun as yet had scarcely found their way into the crater.

He turned, shivering, as DuChane sauntered toward him. "What's that thing down below?"

"What does it look like?"

"Like a huge ball of clay. But the scaffolding and building equipment—these bunkhouses—indicate human handiwork. The old duffer said something about a space ship. This couldn't be——"

"There's little enough I can tell

you," responded DuChane. "I've been here less than a week. Slinky and I lost our bearings in a storm. It's a good hideout — and we're seemingly expected to stick around. The dipsomaniac and her queer companion have been here longer. She used to cook for the construction crew.

"Whatever that thing is—" he indicated the huge mud-colored ball in the pit below—"was practically in that condition when we arrived. The self-styled scientist, Thornboldt, seems to have started out with the idea of pioneering in space travel. My information comes chiefly from an article in a scientific magazine that I ran across in his shack, denouncing him as a charlatan. Near as I can gather, he evolved certain theories about nullifying gravity by atomic polarization — if that means anything to you. Claimed to do it by creating violent stresses within a magnetic field. The attacking author—some scientific duck by the name of Lamberton—acknowledged that there was a mathematical basis for Eli's conception, but pointed out that inconceivable power would be required to demonstrate the theory. Do I bore you?"

Marlin started. "Far from it." Then: "You're an educated man," he commented irrelevantly.

Bart DuChane threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing from the opposite cliffs.

"Same to you," he retorted. "I recognized the Harvard accent. Like

old Eli, it is a shame that we should be associating with scum—except that—as he so charmingly puts it—we are scum ourselves." He paused, then, lowering his voice: "Slinky didn't exaggerate. I have engaged in many shady pursuits, not the least of which is bilking the credulous by the ancient and phony art of crystal gazing. The manslaughter rap was the result of a tavern brawl. I have a weakness for low company."

His frankness was a pointed invitation for similar confidences. Marlin hesitated, then, with a shrug: "Not much of interest to tell about myself. My degree isn't from Harvard—nevertheless, it is from a university of good standing. It just happens that there are more openings for a bruiser than a scholar. I wasn't doing so badly in professional football, filling in with wrestling exhibitions and some boxing. Then I fell for a dame—fell hard. A guy without money was mud to her—so I had to get money. Hooked up with a smuggling mob, trucking the stuff over the border. Eventually we had a run-in with revenue officers, and a couple of them were so unfortunate as to stop lead. I got a minimum sentence, but it was plenty long."

"When you got out, naturally, the dame hadn't bothered to wait."

Marlin made no attempt to answer. DuChane nodded.

"It bears out old Goofus. We are not nice people. I wonder what the eighth will be like."

"The eighth?"

"There's to be another, according to legend. You saw the girl, Pearl. It seems she has prophetic spells. According to predictions which Maw claims the girl dropped, eight of us are due to show up, in addition to Eli—four male, four female. What is to happen then is rather vague, but Maw drops dark hints about a mysterious journey. She and Pearl were here first; then came Link and I. Thus you and your friends were more or less expected."

"Surely," expostulated Marlin, "you don't believe——"

"Believe? Without proof, I neither believe nor disbelieve. It's as bigoted to do one as the other. However, we need only one more arrival—female, of course—to complete the prophecy. I hope she turns out to be a good-looker—though I'll admit your friend Sal isn't bad."

Marlin turned away, somehow annoyed.

"Is there such a custom around here as breakfast?"

DuChane sniffed the air. "Maw Barstow seems to have anticipated your question. The eating shack is beyond the bunkhouses."

THE fare produced was abundant if not choice. The whole group evinced hearty appetites, even Pearl, who, despite a soiled ill-fitting gown, seemed scarcely less lovely than she had under the flickering lamplight. She smiled amiably but spoke not at all.

While eating, Marlin let his eyes rove speculatively over the group.

The waif who had crouched beside him, shivering and disheveled, over the fire last night now looked somewhat more the part of an underworld moll. Sally had made an attempt to do her hair, but the dab of color applied to her lips accentuated the wary hardness of her expression.

Len McGruder, bull-necked, furtive-eyed, loose-lipped, inspired in Marlin a deep antipathy. "A man who would sell his best friend down the river," was his mental summation.

Maw Barstow, referred to by DuChane as a dipsomaniac, was probably not as old as she looked. Her unsavory appearance seemed due more to disfigurement than to disposition. A rather sentimental but plain-spoken person, she was unquestionably devoted to Pearl.

Slinky Link, with his ingratiating yet repellent manner, was a parasitic type of petty criminal—not particularly dangerous—not particularly anything.

DuChane, as Marlin sensed him, was a man at war with himself. "In a way," reflected Marlin, "He's too much like me."

The thought occurred that if he were looking at himself through other eyes, he would not be more favorably impressed than by the others. "I'd see a poker-faced lug with a cauliflower ear and the body of a stevedore," he reflected. "It'd be pretty hard to guess that a hard-

looking egg like me ever dabbled in science and still has a yen to find out what fascinating stuff is hidden in the covers of every book—even if that book is only a human face.”

It was difficult to account for the oldster, Elias Thornboldt. Danish, Marlin judged him to be. Apparently he was providing food and shelter for the gathering, much as he despised them all. He sat at the head of the table, coldly aloof, consuming food in enormous mouthfuls.

When his appetite was appeased, Thornboldt stalked from the cook-shack, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. A few moments later, Marlin found him standing on the ledge, moodily staring down at the huge ball of clay.

“Still it moves!” he muttered. “It moves and rolls and grows.”

“What moves?” demanded Marlin sharply. “That thing down there? And what is it?”

The older man turned as if to speak. But he only glared at the group surrounding him and abruptly walked away.

“It’s a fact,” DuChane commented. “If you watch patiently you can see it. The ball seems to be resting in a bed of ooze—a sort of tarry substance. As the sun rises, it softens under the heat, and when the heat is withdrawn, it hardens. The alternate expansion and contraction seems to impart a rotation to the ball. It’s more than a hundred feet across, yet in the time

I’ve been here, I’ll swear it’s turned half way over. And that isn’t all. Care to take a trip down?”

Presently they stood on a precarious scaffolding close to the huge sphere. The bed of ooze could be discerned engulfing its base. Already, under the heat of the sun, a steaming effluvium was rising from the surface. The outside of the ball was caked with a grayish crust of the stuff.

“Feel it,” urged DuChane. “Hard?”

“Yes, it’s hard,” admitted Marlin. “Like stone.”

“Now look.” DuChane caught up a crowbar and drove it into the bulging wall. It pierced the crust and sank a short distance into the interior.

“Push on it,” he directed.

MARLIN tested the resistance to the bar. Under pressure it sank deeper. He could even twist it slowly.

“Seems kind of—rubbery—inside,” he commented.

“Pull it out.”

He did so. Immediately the hole filled with a flowing exudation similar to the ooze below him. It spread over the edges and began to harden.

“Acts like the stuff they used to put in bicycle tires to make them puncture-proof,” commented Marlin. “Is it solid clear through?”

DuChane stared. He was breathing more heavily than his recent exertion seemed to warrant.

"I forgot you don't know. This is Thornboldt's space ship. Or was. He built it in the form of a metal sphere, girded and braced inside, all equipped with dynamos and machinery. Had a big crew of workmen. When it was just about finished—even provisioned—his backers decided that the whole thing was crazy and shut off his money supply. Articles like that one by Lamberton finished them. To cap the climax, the thing broke through its scaffold and sank into this pit."

"Funny place to build in the first place."

"His idea was to keep the construction a secret from the general public. This crater-like depression, with its only entrance through the old mine tunnel, was far enough out of the way to accomplish the purpose, even though it must have enormously increased the cost of assembling materials. Anyway, after it fell into the pit, the creeping rotation commenced and the shell has gradually taken on this coating of lava—or whatever the stuff is. It's at least four feet thick by this time. Somewhere inside is an entrance port, but there's no way of locating it. The whole thing is so incomprehensible that it's driven him crazy. At least he thinks it has."

"You think otherwise?"

DuChane glanced at his companion. "Possibly his theories are ridiculous, but no one can deny that the ball actually moves and is coating itself with a thick layer of this

lava-like stuff. It's just one of those accidental freaks of nature."

Marlin brushed at a swarm of insects and leaned over to follow the flight of a bird into the depths below.

"Two to one it never comes up," DuChane offered. "The stuff is like flypaper. The smell seems to have a fatal attraction for birds and small animals—chipmunks and the like. Or perhaps they're drawn by the seeds that blow in and stick to the surface. Sometimes they escape, but if the consistency is right, it sucks them in, like quicksand. Maw Barstow claims she lost a flock of chicks that way. And if you can believe her, several dogs, and a cat or two, have been trapped by the ooze during her time. There's even a story about some calves and sheep that wandered over the ledge and never could be located, the inference being . . ."

They were interrupted by the arrival of Thornboldt, followed reluctantly by Link and McGruder. He was carrying pick and shovel and seemed unexpectedly imbued with energy.

"Get tools," he commanded tersely. "You can't stand around here like drones. I have valuable equipment in there. It must be saved."

He attacked the shell with furious strokes of the pick. After a moment, Marlin joined his efforts with the crowbar.

There was no room for the others to participate, even if they had felt inclined to help. They stood watch-

ing curiously as Marlin and Eli broke through the crust. This was the easiest part of the undertaking. From a depth of two or three inches below the surface, the substance was a sticky, rubbery mass, which inexorably flowed back to fill the gap made by each blow of pick or crowbar.

"You ain't gettin' nowhere," volunteered Link, peering through his hair.

Eli paused long enough to glare at him. "What would you suggest?" he demanded, then scathingly added, "Loafer!"

"If you had something you could push through. A pipe—or — or something."

The scientist dropped his pick.

"Is it out of the mouths of fools and nit-wits I must get ideas!" he exploded. "Come!"

The rest following, he picked his way over scaffolding, rocks, and heaps of construction material. He stopped, frowningly studying a section of drain pipe some two feet across and five feet long.

"We will try this," he decided.

CHAPTER IV

THEY managed to get the cylinder up on the scaffolding and to insert one end in the opening gouged in the outer shell. Slow but steady progress toward penetrating the gummy mass was achieved by imparting a rotary motion to the pipe section. By mid-morning, Marlin had rigged up a crude leverage

device of timbers, on the principle of a pipe wrench, which expedited the process of screwing the cylinder into the interior.

From time to time it was necessary to shovel out the accumulation of ooze. DuChane called Marlin's attention to a dead field mouse in one of the shovel loads.

"No calves?" queried Marlin.

"Not yet, but you can't tell."

By nightfall they had made definite progress. The pipe was buried at least two feet in the sphere. Tired and not a little out of sorts, they returned to the cookshack. "Me, I'm through," growled McGruder. "I'm hittin' the trail first thing tomorrow—and what's more, sis, you're comin' with me," he stared at Sally.

"That's what you think!" she responded disdainfully.

But a plentiful breakfast, or perhaps curiosity, altered the detective's plans. When operations were resumed, he showed up tardily to take a hand.

By mid-afternoon, they had succeeded in screwing the pipe some four and a half feet into the interior, when an obstacle was encountered.

Marlin straightened his weary back. "Dig the stuff out," he instructed. "We've struck the shell—I hope."

When the message was relayed to Eli that the shell had been reached, he came plunging through the tunnel.

"Do nothing till I come!" he

shouted from the ledge above. With utter disregard for safety, he hurtled down the slope and drew up panting on the platform.

"We will cut through," he announced. "It needs a small man." He looked at Link appraisingly. "Can you handle a blowtorch?"

When the slinky one was safely at work under Marlin's direction, Eli impatiently herded the others away.

"You are doing no good here. Come—help with the things I must take."

The group eyed him with astonishment.

"Take where?" demanded DuChane. "You don't expect this contraption actually to fly?"

"What I think is my own affair!" Thornboldt's beard trembled with the vehemence of his indignation. "Who are you to question my intentions—you who cannot even comprehend my scientific principles!"

With raised eyebrows, DuChane glanced at Marlin. Then, accompanied by McGruder, he followed the scientist up the winding trail while Link continued his blowtorch operations. Whatever the inventor's intentions might be, Marlin felt an insatiable curiosity to view the interior of the incredible sphere.

"Got her!" presently came the muffled announcement from the depths of the pipe. Link wriggled out, holding the blowtorch gingerly at arm's length.

"Melted away like butter," was

the little man's comment. "Now a safe I cut into once—"

Marlin lost the rest by starting up the hill to lend Sally Camino a hand with a heavy chest she was carrying.

"He's got us all working," she observed, as Marlin took the burden. "We've been packing stuff all morning." Absently she dislodged a pebble from between her bare toes. "What's he going to do, bury himself in that thing?"

"You've got me." Marlin shrugged.

By the time he had deposited the chest on the platform, McGruder and DuChane appeared, carrying a long packing case between them. Maw Barstow followed, also burdened, and after her Eli himself. Smiling serenely, but empty-handed, Pearl brought up the rear.

"I must be the first inside," insisted Eli. "Bring the other boxes."

They did not depart until the scientist, heaving and puffing, and by dint of wholehearted shoving on the part of those outside, had managed to squeeze his bulk through the pipe. They heard the sound of rending fabric, accompanied by agonized imprecations, as he worked his way over the jagged metal edges. Then followed a heavy "plop."

"Are you hurt?" Marlin called.

"Naturally I am hurt! I am killed!" came the dark response. "But no matter. Pass me those boxes."

At Marlin's suggestion, Link first crawled through with the blowtorch and trimmed away the jagged me-

tal. Then the boxes were pushed through and they returned for more.

Marlin glanced curiously around Thornboldt's recent living quarters. The shack was nearly stripped. Books, apparatus, provisions, bedding—everything except the larger pieces of furniture — had been packed.

"The old rascal is nuts, all right," was Marlin's comment to Sally. The others had departed with their loads. "Think we've got all he wants?"

Before she could answer, a staccato volley of shots interrupted. The sounds appeared to come from the slope below.

CHAPTER V

BOTH hurried to the single window. Where the wagon trail skirted the base of the rocky hillside, a half dozen crouching figures came into view. Armed with rifles and pistols, they were creeping cautiously up the incline.

A single shot from above caused some of the group to drop flat. Others dodged into the brush. There was a movement among the lengthening shadows at the left.

"What goes on!" demanded Sally. "Gang war?"

"They're not shooting at each other," Marlin asserted, after watching the cautious maneuvers of the two groups. "Looks as if they were closing in on some one. Sheriff's posse, I guess."

Another shot directed their eyes to the rock behind which the fugitive or fugitives must be hiding.

From its concealment, a figure edged into view. There appeared to be only one.

"Poor devil—sure is done for," commented Marlin. "Must be public enemy number one, to judge by the number in the posse. Look! There he goes!"

Crouching close to the ground, the overalled figure dodged from cover to cover, each fleeting appearance bringing a fusillade of shots from the converging squads. He replied with a couple of bursts from his own weapon, then fell on his stomach behind a rock and commenced reloading.

Perhaps it was because their experience had prejudiced them against all forces of law; perhaps it was merely sympathy with the underdog, that impelled Sally and Marlin to pull mentally for the fugitive.

"That's no protection!" breathed Sally. They'll have him between a crossfire. Why doesn't he make a dash for it?"

"Where'll he dash?" queried Marlin.

For answer, Sally opened the door a crack and called sharply, "Here!"

The outlaw glanced desperately over his shoulder, then, crouching and dodging, he made a zig-zag retreat up the hill. A rattle of shots accompanied this daring retreat. It was incredible that such an open target could escape the murderous

bullets coming from all directions.

A final spurt and the fugitive fell sprawling across the threshold. Marlin dragged him inside as Sally slammed and bolted the door. Blood spurted from a neck wound and the outlaw clutched at his side, groaning.

"Done for—Thanks!" he gasped. "You better—" The effort at speech ended in a gasp.

The sound of running boots on the gravel, followed by a peremptory knock, indicated the arrival of the posse.

"Open up! This is the law!" an imperative voice called.

Sally tugged at the wounded man. "Stall 'em off!" she whispered tensely. "I'll get him back inside."

With a hopeless gesture, Marlin tried to restrain her. "We'll only get ourselves in duteh—We can't hope to—"

Her look of scorn checked the protest. Shrugging, he lifted the desperately wounded man and supported him into the tunnel. Once erect, the outlaw seemed able to stumble along by leaning heavily on the bare-footed girl. Marlin closed the door and gave attention to the increasing demands from out in front.

He unlatched the swinging window.

"What's up?" he demanded.

A stocky figure detached itself from the group of twelve or fifteen bunched around the door.

"You're obstructing the law! Open that door!"

"Easy now," returned Marlin.

"I'm not obstructing any law. I just want to know what it's all about? Who are you?"

"Sheriff Bates of Grinnell County. You're harboring an outlaw—the Picaroon Kid."

"Never heard of him. What'd he do?"

"Held up a band, for one thing," snapped the sheriff. "Wanted for other jobs and for killing two deputies. You gonna open that door?"

"Sure, I'll open it," Marlin spoke slowly, trying to give Sally time. "The poor devil's carcass is full of lead—no danger of his getting away."

Withdrawing, Marlin methodically fastened the window, then had an ostentatiously difficult time manipulating the door lock.

"Cut out that stalling!" called the sheriff furiously. "Are you gonna open up, or do we smash our way in?"

Marlin opened the door. With an impatient grunt, the sheriff brushed past him, glaring around uncertainly.

"Where'd you hide him?"

The outlaw's gun lay on the floor where it had been dropped in his fall, and a trail of blood led across the board floor. The sheriff snatched up the weapon, then crossed the room in a stride, flinging open the inner door. He peered down the tunnel.

"Some hideout!" he commented. "We'll look into this. Come on, men."

Marlin moved ahead of them, managing to delay progress by feeling his way with extreme caution through the dark passage. Eventually, they emerged on the shelving ledge.

"Where'd he go?" demanded the sheriff, surveying the scene.

"You know as much as I do."

A hasty search of bunkhouses and cook shack was sufficient to show that they were unoccupied. Two or three of the posse discovered a continuation of the blood trail, and they followed it to the descent which led to the sphere. Marlin's anxious eyes caught a glimpse of a bare foot disappearing in the entrance pipe. No one else was in sight.

"What's that big ball?" demanded the sheriff, staring.

"You've got me."

The blood trail led unmistakably toward the sphere. Soon the sheriff was peering curiously through the opening.

"The Kid's inside all right. Blood smears all down the pipe. Somebody climb in after him."

The men looked uncertainly at one another. It would be a simple matter for any armed person inside to put a bullet through the first head that showed itself. The sheriff evidently had no relish for the prospect and did not care to designate any one for the job. He turned to Marlin.

"You go in there," he ordered.

"Tell your buddies they'll save trouble by bein' reasonable. Tell

'em to pass the Kid out. If they don't we'll toss a few tear gas bombs inside. You gonna do it?"

"What else can I do?"

With some forcible assistance from behind, Marlin worked his way down the tube. At the inner edge, hands grasped him by the shoulders and helped him to land on a floor of some kind.

"You tell 'em what I said!" came the sheriff's voice. "No stalling!"

His eyes unaccustomed to the darkness, Marlin allowed himself to be guided along some sort of a wooden platform. It slanted at an angle which made walking difficult. The guiding hands proved to be DuChane's.

"This is a hell of a mess," the latter breathed. "What's to be done?"

"Give up the outlaw. We're trapped in here like rats," Marlin answered. "If we don't come through, they'll toss in tear bombs. Can any of you imagine what that would be like in this place?"

"Leave it to that fool Sally!" McGruder said harshly.

The girl turned on him with a spiteful retort as an impatient call reached them from outside. Marlin raised his voice.

"Give me a chance!" he bellowed. The words echoed through the hollow interior. "It's dark in here. I've got to find 'em, haven't I?" He dropped his voice to a whisper. "How's the wounded jasper?"

"Passed out," DuChane informed him. "I'll lead you to him."

Feeling their way, they emerged in a box-like enclosure partly filled with tools. Maw Barstow, holding a feeble flashlight, squatted beside a huddled mass which was evidently the wounded man. Cradling his head in her lap was Pearl. An accidental shifting of the flashlight beam revealed her tranquil, madonna-like smile as she gazed down at the blood-smeared face.

"Sorry," Marlin announced. "We've got to get rid of this bad bozo. How's he doing?"

"You ain't gonna move the pore critter!" countered Maw fiercely.

Protest was futile. DuChane settled the argument by seizing the shrieking woman and holding her while Marlin gathered up the unconscious outlaw and felt his way back toward the opening. He was nearly thrown from his feet once as the platform—apparently the whole sphere—gave an unexpected lurch.

"Where's the place?" he demanded, sensing figures in the darkness surrounding. "I can't see the light."

Sally's laugh reached him shrilly. "And what's more, you won't."

He paused, uncomprehending. Link's squeaky voice brought the explanation.

"They can't get us now. McGruder and me levered the pipe out with a board. You oughta see the stuff pour in."

The full enormity of this was slow in penetrating Marlin's mind.

"What's that!" called DuChane, his voice rising in alarm. He came

stumbling toward them in the darkness. "Now isn't that fine! It isn't enough that we're trapped in here, but we've got to make the trap foolproof by blocking the only way out!"

Unmindful of the stormy exchange of insults and recriminations that surged around him, Marlin picked his way back to the tool room and deposited his groaning charge at Maw Barstow's feet.

"Better dress the wounds," he commented. "Where's Eli?"

"Somewhere down there," Maw replied vaguely. "Pearlie, darlin', help me get this bloody shirt off'n the pore dear."

CHAPTER VI

Returning to the others, Marlin found DuChane holding forth in a profane diatribe which included not only McGruder, Link, and Sally, but all their antecedents.

"There's nothing to get excited over," Marlin interposed, calmly. "What difference does it make?"

"Difference?" DuChane roared. "Has it occurred to you that we've no possible way to get out of here? That ooze must have filled up the opening solidly by now."

"But the pipe is still projecting from the outside. Our sheriff friend will probably have gumption enough to force it in, just as we did. He'll be plenty mad by the time he finishes the job, but as far as I can see this merely delays our coming-out party for a few hours."

"And makes it tougher," growled DuChane. Marlin's words, nevertheless, seemed to have a quieting effect on his anger. His mood changed.

"We're in for it, but they can't pin anything on me. I served the rap for my little accident with a gun. Slinky here is likely to go up for a stretch, just on general principles. McGruder—now that baby has a bad conscience or he wouldn't have been so anxious to close the entrance. It wouldn't surprise me if—"

"Mind your own business!" snarled the detective. "Loud-mouthed blabbers like you is like to wake up with a knife in their ribs."

"So! A killer! One of the breed that sticks a knife in your back! What say, Dave—shall I teach him a lesson?"

There was a scuffle in the dark. "You lemme go!" roared McGruder. "I'll—" The words ended in a jolting gasp as two bodies struck the floor.

The thrashing limbs and bodies flailed for a moment, eliciting a wholehearted round of abuse from Sally as they almost knocked her feet from under. After a minute, DuChane arose.

"No weapons," he reported. "Bad boys shouldn't make threats unless they've got something to back 'em up with. Next time," he added ominously, "I'll cave your teeth in."

There was a faintly muttered response as McGruder retired to a

safer distance.

"Where's Eli?" again demanded Marlin.

"He left us here," DuChane replied, "saying he was going down to the control room. Wonder if he has any way of lighting this—Oh, hello!"

A sudden radiance engulfed them. Blinking, they stared at each other—at their surroundings.

The tilted surface on which they stood was apparently nothing more than a scaffolding in the unfinished portion of the sphere. The boxes and crates they had loaded were distributed around the closed entrance-hole. Peering upward, they looked into a network of girders, bracing the huge expanse, weirdly lighted here and there with single bulbs—evidently a temporary lighting arrangement for the workmen.

Below the level of their vision, also on a slant, was a partly enclosed portion of three or four levels, resembling a ship's superstructure. The humming noise of a dynamo accompanied the establishment of light service. Thornboldt emerged from a doorway and stood with head tilted back, surveying the bleak interior.

"Close the opening," he called out, catching sight of the group on the platform.

An involuntary laugh greeted the order.

Annoyed at the failure of his command to produce activity, the scientist worked his way up to the platform, emerging between the end-

shafts of a ladder. At the point in the hull where the pipe had penetrated, a bulging mass of the lava-like substance was slowly hardening.

He grunted. "Temporarily that will do. Later it must be covered with metal."

DuChane winked at Sally. "Anchors aweigh!" he sang. "Heave ho and a bottle of rum! Stand by for the good ship Thornboldt. But look here, Eli, what about the eight?"

"Eh?"

"Seems to me Pearl predicted we'd make our start when there were four men, four gals, beside yourself. According to my reckoning, it doesn't count out."

"You ask me to take stock in such superstition? Am I a scientist or a Hottentot?"

Another lurch caused them all to grasp at near objects for support.

"What makes it do that?" demanded Sally, nervously. "Ever since we climbed in it's been acting like a horse with the heavens."

"It's the sphere turning and settling," DuChane informed her. His arm encircled her waist and she struggled—though not too violently, Marlin thought—to break away. "Notice the floor's tilting? Won't be long before it stands straight up."

"Four and four," muttered the Dane into his beard. "There should be eight instead of seven. Where is that girl?"

Catching a glimpse of Pearl in the tool enclosure, he strode toward

it.

"Oh no—he isn't superstitious!" commented DuChane.

"If we could rig up a periscope—push it through the soft part inside of the pipe—we might stand a chance of observing what goes on outside," Marlin suggested.

Without enthusiasm, DuChane agreed that it was a good idea. Releasing his hold on Sally, he followed Marlin down the ladder and they began an investigation of the more nearly finished section of the interior.

Some of the machinery they found understandable, much of it was strange. All loose objects had been tumbled into corners—probably had rolled around the circumference of whatever confined space they happened to be in, as the sphere slowly accomplished its rotation. But the supplies for the most part had been packed in anticipation of severe jolts. There was a really enormous supply of canned goods and other food items in sealed containers, but as yet no bunks had been erected in the doorless staterooms.

In one compartment they found a disarray of packing cases heaped together along one side-wall. One box had been crushed, revealing a gleaming cylinder.

"What are you doing there?" demanded Thornboldt from the doorway.

"If these happen to be instruments, perhaps you can tell us if there's a periscope in the lot," returned DuChane.

Eli fell to examining the boxes. "Try this one," he suggested. "Yes, that's a good idea. Very good." He hurried away, leaving them wondering at his unusual good spirits.

The instrument they unearthed was all that could be desired. "I believe," Marlin commented, "we can get this through by encasing it in a protective sheath."

"How'll we get the sheath off?"

"It can be done. We need a tube large enough to admit passage of the instrument. It can be just a rolled strip of sheet iron. We'll streamline it by welding the end to a point. When we've worked it through the mass far enough to project beyond the large pipe, we'll slide in the periscope. Last of all, we take a good solid rod, attach it to the rear projection of our sheath, and shove. When the sheath has cleared the top, it'll drop off, leaving the periscope head exposed."

"Might work," DuChane acknowledged. "You've an ingenious mind. But we'd better wait until dark. Less chance of being observed by the august forces of law and order."

"It'll be well along in the night before we've finished," returned Marlin. He caught hold of a door post as the sphere gave another shuddering lurch.

In their quest for material, they came upon Eli in the lower level of the superstructure. He was making adjustments throughout a bank of coils which seemed to constitute the major element of his apparatus.

Pausing curiously, DuChane demanded:

"What's that for?"

Eli grunted, but the pride of an inventor won out over disdain.

"You could not understand," he informed them ungraciously. "Locked in these coils is a power that will make the name of Elias Thornboldt outstanding in history. A magnetic field in which occurs such a stress as the atom has never known causes polarization of the repulsion plates below this floor which is—how can I express it—the opposite of magnetism, of attraction, of the force of gravity."

"In other words," retorted DuChane, "anti-gravity." He nudged Marlin. "Professor Lamberton says your conclusions are unsound—that it would be impossible to build up a sufficiently strong magnetic field to accomplish the results you claim."

"That nincompoop!" exploded the scientist. "That stuffed piece of shirt! What does he know about atomic stress? Nothing! Yet he presumes—" Eli paused suspiciously. "Who told you about Lamberton?"

"Oh, we get around!"

The bearded scientist snorted. "Why bandy words? To show up Lamberton in all his stupidity, I have only to do this—"

With a dramatic gesture, he thrust home the prongs of a huge switch which occupied the central panel of a control board in front of the coils. Involuntarily, Marlin braced himself

for a shock. Nothing happened. Nothing, at least, beyond a faint hum which emanated from the towering apparatus.

"Well?" queried DuChane impudently.

Eli shook his beard impatiently. "What did you expect? First it is necessary to build up a magnetic potential. Then, with this lever, I release the current through the repulsion plates." He caressed the device but refrained from demonstrating. "Naturally, I will make the first tests with utmost caution. The lever acts as a rheostat, by which the power is applied in any degree required, governing the acceleration. If I should move it to the extreme limit we would be hurled away from the earth with such violence as to crush every bone."

"How about steering?" queried Marlin. "Wouldn't you be condemned to travel in a straight line from any object which the plates happened to be facing at the start?"

"Do you take me for a numskull? Naturally the plates are segmented. They can be turned like a—like a —"

"Like the sections of a venetian blind," interposed DuChane. "I get you. And—er—when do you start?"

Eli frowned. "I shall not delay long. All essentials are in place—the storage batteries, fully charged to furnish current for at least seven months, the dynamos, the conversion coils. First comes the trial flight. It will be brief—but sufficient to

astonish the world. Then, when I have enjoyed the sight of Lamberton and those imbecile financiers groveling in the dust, I shall finish the sphere—without their assistance—and go—who knows where? To the moon, the planets—"

His grandiloquent vision was interrupted by another of the periodic lurches, which caused them all to grasp for support. Overhead, the girders groaned as they accommodated themselves to a new stress. Somewhere, a heavy object fell.

DuChane suddenly doubled up with mirth.

"Look!" he chortled. "Oh, this is good!"

Marlin followed the direction of his pointing finger. Involuntarily, he smiled.

"By rights," he commented grimly, "our bones ought to be crushed to powder. Well, that settles that."

Thornboldt stared blankly at the rheostat lever. His body, flung against it by the upheaval of the sphere, had pushed it to the extreme limit which he had warned would produce dire results.

"It means nothing!" he protested hollowly. "One faulty connection could make the whole thing a failure. Besides, how can you expect a lifting power that was intended for a hollow sphere to lift hundreds of tons of mud? Leave me alone. How can I work with such imbecile interruptions?"

They withdrew, leaving him staring with frowning contemplation at

the ineffective starting lever.

"The old coot had me wondering at that," Marlin confided, as he and DuChane set about their task of installing the periscope. "I'm glad to have it settled."

They worked steadily into the night, pausing only to take part in a meal concocted from the ship's stores.

The outlaw had been made as comfortable as possible in one of the doorless staterooms, but was tossing in semi-delirium. He had been struck by at least six bullets, as reported by Sally. "Hmm!" grunted Marlin, busy with his welding torch. "Not much chance of his pulling through."

"Pearl says he will," returned Sally. She spoke with an air of amusement — almost of mystery. "Know what that girl had us do? She insisted on our puncturing the blister over that opening in the shell and drawing off about a quart of that gummy stuff for poultices. Since the idea came from Pearl, Maw thinks it must be the berries."

"Sounds unsanitary, to say the least."

"Oh, I don't know," DuChane disagreed. "Certain clays are used medicinally for drawing out inflammation. Come to think of it, this stuff resembles antiphlogistin as much as anything."

"If it works," observed Marlin, "we might put the goo on the market and make our fortunes."

The others had all turned in when Marlin and DuChane finished their

task. As nearly as they could judge, the panoramic sight would be a success, although little could be discerned through it in the darkness except the outline which separated the blackness below the crater rim from the somewhat brighter hue of the sky.

"Frankly, now that we've accomplished the job, I don't know what good it's going to do," DuChane grumbled, as they turned to seek out their sleeping pallets. "If the sheriff starts to dig his way in, or if he chooses to do it just for meanness—he can snap the head off in a second."

Marlin grunted. The same thought had occurred to him, but he had kept it to himself. It had seemed better for the morale of the group to offer a show of activity.

As it was, their example had inspired even McGruder and Link to chip in toward opening packing cases, distributing the bedding, and otherwise providing temporary living quarters. All were sufficiently tired to sleep. Marlin dropped off almost instantly from exhaustion when he rolled himself in his blankets.

CHAPTER VII

He woke with a stifling sense of oppression. In that indefinite period between sleeping and waking, he struggled with a terrified conviction that the whole mass of the enclosing sphere was caving in on him, smothering, crushing his chest,

grinding him against the floor. For some minutes, he seemed unable to move. Eventually, his head clearing somewhat, he struggled up, gasping for breath and fighting a surge of nausea. The crushing sensation had been so vivid that it was several minutes before he could overcome it.

From an adjoining cubicle, the moans of the wounded outlaw penetrated his consciousness. He rose painfully, mindful of sore and stiffened muscles, and stumbled out onto the ramp.

Overhead, the scattered lights which gave a faint illumination to the network of girders, were casting weird, swaying shadows, as they did after every lurch of the sphere. It was such a lurch, Marlin realized, that probably woke him. The floor, he noticed, had returned more nearly to level.

Maw Barstow had spread her pallet across the bare opening of the outlaw's room, and lay there like a watchdog—anything but a lovely sight with her upturned face and open mouth. She was making hard work of sleep and did not stir when Marlin stepped over her and knelt beside the suffering figure inside.

A rag was immersed in a pan of water at the side of the pallet. Surmising its purpose, he squeezed a little between the feverish lips and then wiped off the drawn face. The muddy stuff of the poultice had oozed out around the neck wound. Marlin wiped some of it away and adjusted the bandage, then pulled

down the cover to see if other bandages needed similar attention.

The outlaw, though wiry, seemed to have a rather frail physique. His face was smooth and boylike, almost sensitive, despite the hard set of the mouth. A tight bandage swathed the chest, but as Marlin's fingers felt along its edge he was struck by the soft, pliable texture of the flesh beneath.

For a minute, he paused, considering the faintly moaning figure. For some strange reason, chills raced up his spine.

Deliberately, he drew down the cover, until he could view the outstretched body. Then, very carefully, he restored the blanket to its place, tucking it carefully around the sleeping figure. The figure that was not a man—but a girl . . .

When he rose to leave a moment later, Pearl was framed in the doorway, her lips parted in the enigmatic smile which belied the innocent vacuity of her eyes.

Marlin stepped over Maw Barstow's sleeping body and took the white-gowned girl gently by the arm.

"Better get back to your covers," he advised; then, softly: "Girl, oh girl! Maybe you've got something after all!"

When Marlin next awakened, it was to the rude shock of rough hands shaking him excitedly. He struggled up, his first impulse to strike out in resentment. It was DuChane.

"Wake up, Dave! For God's sake, wake up! I've got something to show you!"

Still half asleep, Marlin followed the other toward the ladder which led to the scaffold by which they had first entered. He felt strangely lightheaded, nauseated, wobbly on his feet, and his muscles ached. Unsteadily, he followed the other up to the scaffold.

DuChane applied his eye to the periscope, then gestured.

"Look!" His voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

Marlin crouched before the eyepiece. He peered through it with vague bewilderment at first, then with growing interest—concern—amazement.

He spoke at last. His voice strained and unfamiliar.

"There's nothing out there! No ground—no hillside—no crater—no scaffolding—nothing! Nothing but stars. Stars and blackness."

DuChane moistened his lips.

"It's an illusion," whispered Marlin. "We can't be—"

He glanced up at the girders. The shadows were still shifting in a weird dance to the cadence of swaying lights.

"I know when it happened," he breathed hoarsely. "I woke up—a little past midnight—with a terrible sense of oppression. Felt as if I were being crushed. It must have been the acceleration."

DuChane swallowed. "Nothing like that now. In fact, it's just the opposite—a touch of weightlessness.

We'd better find Eli—have it out with him."

The bearded scientist was snoring furiously on his pallet in the control room. They woke him without ceremony.

DuChane interrupted the diatribe that trembled on the older man's lips.

"What right had you to do this?" he accused. "How do you know you can get us back safely? Damn it all!" DuChane's anger rose as the full enormity of the situation broke over him. "How do you expect to steer the crazy thing—find your way back—land it? That dinky periscope is about as useful for guidance as a cigarette lighter in a blizzard!"

Eli stiffened. "If you gentlemen will kindly explain what you are talking about!"

"Why, you—!" DuChane broke off. "Mean to tell us you don't know?"

The scientist's blank stare continued.

"We're in space," Marlin informed him tersely.

The older man seemed unable to comprehend. A momentary triumph lighted in his eyes, then faded into suspicion.

"Go away!" he ordered gruffly. "I have no mood for silly jokes."

Still, he submitted as they assisted him to his feet and hustled him toward the periscope.

A few moments later, racing back to the control room, he began a feverish examination of instruments and

dials.

"I understand now. Yes—it is clear. I should have known, but in dealing with new forces—one lacks the guidance of experience. Lamberton—that imbecile? How I shall laugh. Charlatan eh! Yes, yes. It was necessary to build up a sufficient potential—to do that naturally took a great deal longer—"

"Look here," interrupted DuChane. "Isn't it possible that the coating on the sphere somehow acted as a storage reservoir into which your current poured until it built up this—this terrific potential you've mentioned? I mean—well, perhaps this storing up of power multiplied the current generated by your dynamos, until they overcame the objection Lamberton pointed out—that of obtaining sufficient power to produce the atomic stress."

"Nonsense!" Eli retorted reddening. "That imbecile has not the brains to grasp even my basic theory. There is no connection between my conversion coils and the mud coating!"

"You have a ground of some sort, haven't you?"

"Certainly. The steel shell of the sphere—" The inventor paused abruptly. "That dense outer coating of clay— Yes, yes. It might so act." He paused in exasperation. "Gentlemen! Please kindly go away! Is it not enough that I have great responsibilities, but you must come around with your childish theorizing?"

By this time, the others had been

awakened by the commotion, and were crowding around the control room entrance.

"Wha—what's up?" demanded Link.

Marlin looked at DuChane; DuChane returned the look.

"Somebody has to break the news," said Marlin grimly. His eyes swept the gathering. "You may as well have it straight. We're no longer on earth; we're in space."

"Whadda you mean—space?" Link was bewildered.

"This is a space vessel isn't it—built to rise from the earth and fly off into the void? Well, contrary to expectations, it's doing just that. How far above earth we are, there's no way of telling—but I'm inclined to think it's one hell of a long way."

CHAPTER VIII

In an ordinary group, such an announcement might have brought hysterical outbursts from the women and at least some kind of clamor from the men. Eli's motley guests were either slower of comprehension or else hardened to vicissitudes. McGruder turned a rather ghastly color, murmured "Jees!" and sat down heavily on a packing box. No one else evinced more than bewilderment.

"So what?" queried Sally Camino. "Where are we going and how do we get back? Whose bright idea was this anyway?"

"Nobody's," Marlin informed her. "Eli left the forcefield in operation

and accidentally pushed the starting lever last night. Since nothing happened, it never occurred to him to swing it back. The explanation seems to be that when enough power had accumulated, the anti-gravity polarization occurred, and we parted company with Mother Earth."

Link greeted this with a snicker.

"I was just thinkin'," he explained when the others focused puzzled eyes upon him, "what a surprise that sheriff an' his deputies is gonna have when they find the old mud-ball gone this mornin'. Maybe some of 'em was on guard when it whooshed up into the sky afore their eyes."

No one laughed.

"No use kidding ourselves," Marlin commented. "We're in a tough predicament. We don't know where the sphere is headed; there's nothing but that hopelessly inadequate periscope to guide it by, and personally, I don't see the ghost of a chance of our landing anywhere. We're just a mote of dust in the void of space."

"It's just like Pearlle said, ain't it dearie?" cackled Maw Barstow unexpectedly. "We are all goin' on a long journey. Pearlle never makes a mistake."

"Oh, I don't know!" retorted DuChane, slyly. "I could cite an instance. Or maybe it's just faulty arithmetic. There were to be four and four, not three and five—at least 'that's the way I heard it.'"

"And that's all you know, smarty," chuckled Maw.

Sally winked at the older woman,

while Marlin controlled his features with an effort.

"Ask her when we're gonna land—and where at?" suggested Link, peering hopefully.

"Pearlie will tell us everything in her own good time," retorted Maw, grandly. "Won't you darlin'? Don't you want to tell us where we're goin'?"

The girl smiled sweetly, and uttered the first words Marlin had heard from her lips.

"There are so many stones."

McGruder laughed hoarsely. Maw checked him with a ferocious look. "Go on, dearie," she urged. "Tell us more?"

The girl stared upward, as if visioning something in the distance. Her words slurred together; she seemed only half aware of speaking them.

"The world is a stone. There are many stones. So many lonely stones."

Marlin again experienced the uncanny sense of chills spiraling up his back—for no reason that he could comprehend. He looked uncertainly from one face to another. All were staring at the Sybil of the strange voyage.

Maw spoke with vague conviction. "That means something, and don't you mistake it. We'll have to finger it out. Pearlle don't always talk in plain words fer just ever'body to understand."

From behind the huge bank of coils, Elias Thornboldt emerged. He glowered in annoyance.

"Go away!" he ordered. "None of you are permitted in this room." He looked them over with sudden awareness and spoke bitterly. "What a crew for the pioneer flight into space! Instead of a distinguished gathering of world-famous scientists and statesmen, what do I have? Criminals! Go! Out of my sight!"

As they straggled out, DuChane observed with a show of resentment: "We might remind him that if it wasn't for a device rigged up by some of his despised crew, he wouldn't even know his contraption was off the ground."

Burning questions raced through Marlin's mind, but he frankly doubted the scientist's ability to answer them. A genius in his line Thornholdt might be; nevertheless, he was singularly impractical in other directions. One of Marlin's questions related to the persistence of almost normal gravity within the sphere. The explanation, DuChane suggested, must lie in the repulsion plates. While one surface exercised this force, the opposite surface compensated for it by exercising attraction. Though he tentatively accepted this theory for want of a better, Marlin was dissatisfied with it.

Another question related to the direction of their flight. Were they speeding toward or away from the sun? Was there danger of crashing into some planet, moon, or meteoric body, and if so could they avoid such a fate? Observations through the periscope might presently solve the question of direction. Possibly

Eli had instruments which would help.

The days that followed settled down to a dull, monotonous routine. There was nothing—almost literally nothing—to do but eat, sleep, and chafe at the helplessness of their position.

Lacking any measurement of time in the uniform semi-gloom of the sphere, they established an arbitrary day of twenty-four hours. They slept and ate in accustomed routine and kept track of the days of the week.

The initial feeling that something must be done—and done immediately—toward getting out of the predicament, gradually gave way to a sense of hopeless resignation. When they goaded Eli with the necessity for action, he flew into violent rages. They realized at length that he was as much at a loss as any of the party.

How could they guide their course, when the limited observations possible through the periscope scarcely told them whether they were traveling toward the sun or away from it? They might, indeed, be hanging inert in space. Marlin contended that they were moving away from the sun.

"It's a cinch we started in that direction, since our ascent took place at night, when the sun was on the opposite side of the earth."

"If that's correct," growled DuChane, "it means that instead of roasting to death, we're doomed to

perish of cold, when this hunk of dough gets so far away that there aren't any more of the sun's rays for it to absorb."

"We'll be dead of starvation long before that," Marlin added moodily.

The store of provisions seemed enormous at first glance. Now, faced by stern questions of survival, they calculated that it would actually last them not more than five months, and a careful rationing was instituted.

The water tanks would supply them for a period somewhat longer. Bathing and washing were restricted but not altogether denied, for the equipment included an efficient settling tank as well as an electric incinerator and an air-purifying system that was a credit to Eli's foresight.

"Evidently we'll starve to death before we have a chance to perish of thirst," was DuChane's comforting observation. "Unless the goo of our outside shell proves to be edible. It seems to have about every other property we could ask. Storage battery, heat absorber and distributor, healing agent, and waste converter."

He referred to their discovery that the waste products discharged through locks were seemingly absorbed by the clay-like outer coating. "I believe it digests the stuff. Remember how the pit absorbed those birds and small animals that became imbedded in it?" reminded DuChane. "I sometimes feel as if —"

"As if what?" demanded Marlin,

looking at him curiously.

"Nothing. I couldn't put it into words if I tried."

CHAPTER IX

Curiosity centered for a while upon the outlaw, who was making a slow recovery. She—for after a few days her sex had become general knowledge—kept moodily to herself, having little to do with the other women and regarding the men with suspicion.

She gave her real name as Norma Hegstrom. DuChane, by persistent questioning, elicited the additional fact that she had escaped from some institution—possibly a school of correction—and adopted her masquerade on coming West in order to elude the search.

"The way I've got it figured out," he confided to Sally and Marlin, as they sat listlessly on the platform under the periscope, "in order to make good in her boy's disguise and to offset her underlying feminine appearance, she had to act tougher than any of the roughnecks she was thrown with. So, by degrees, she was drawn into the career of an outlaw.

"You'd almost think," he added reflectively, "that Earth spewed out this gang because we're a bunch of what the sociologists call unassimilable elements."

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Sally.

"With all respect to those present, I suppose we could be spared about

as well as any you could mention. Nobody here seems to have any home ties. There's no one back on Earth whose life will be affected by our departure. We haven't contributed anything constructive to society—in fact, on the average, we've been just general nuisances."

Marlin looked at him curiously. "You're implying—"

"I'm not implying a thing," DuChane evaded. He twisted around and picked up a jagged disc of metal. "We've got more serious problems to face. Recognize this?"

"It's the piece Slinky cut out of the opening with the blowtorch."

"Ever look at it?"

Marlin studied the other's face under the swinging shadows. Then he took the metal disc and peered at it closely.

Sally glanced from one serious face to the other. "Well," she demanded, "what's it all about?"

Without a word, Marlin passed her the fragment.

"Link said the blowtorch cut through it like butter," DuChane remarked grimly. "We've noticed how the clay covering digests waste material—tin cans included."

Sally turned the piece over curiously, ran her fingers over the serrated surface, held it up to the light.

"So that's all there is between us and—" She hesitated. "Why it's half eaten through in places—like something rusted. Is it my imagination, or can you see through it?"

"Imagination," assured Marlin. He took the fragment and held it

before his eyes. "No, by thunder! A couple of pinpoint holes have been eaten clear through it."

After a moment, Sally slowly rose.

"No use saying anything to the others," Marlin suggested, noting the listless drag of her bare feet as she started toward the ladder.

She glanced over her shoulder disdainfully.

"What do you take me for?"

But the secret was not long in becoming general property. Len McGruder, who seemed to prefer devious and furtive ways of accomplishing even obvious things, must have been listening from one of many possible hiding places, or at least observing from a distance, for he produced the steel fragment at the next mealtime gathering.

"What's this about the old ball goin' to pieces?" he demanded. "What're you tryin' to put over?"

Marlin eyed him with distaste. "As far as you are concerned," he said slowly, "nothing. There's only one reason why I denied myself the pleasure of letting you know the fate in store for you—and that's because I knew you were so yellow you'd spill it and frighten the rest."

"Yellow, eh!" McGruder jumped to his feet in a rage. He appealed to the group. "What do you think of this bird—and a couple of others I could mention—" he glanced meaningfully at DuChane and Sally—"gettin' their heads together to figger out a way of savin' theirselves while the rest of us is left to rot in this

stinkin' blob of mud? How's that for yellow?"

DuChane laughed mirthlessly.

"If there's any comfort in the knowledge," he said, "there'll be no escape for any of us. The mud coating has a faculty of digesting every inert substance it contacts. Very convenient for taking care of our waste products—but unfortunate because it applies also to our habitation."

"You mean it's gonna eat through the shell?" demanded Link, his weasel eyes glittering.

Marlin shrugged.

"But we gotta do something! Does Eli know?"

The slinky one peered around the table, finding no reassurance in any of the blank faces. He gulped and subsided.

Later, he and McGruder constituted themselves a delegation to lay the problem before the scientist. Eli had practically barricaded himself in the control room. At his bellowed command meals were brought to him at irregular intervals by Maw Barstow. He rarely appeared outside of his retreat, except when he ventured forth briefly for a peep through the periscope.

"What'd he say?" demanded DuChane, when the two returned from their selfimposed mission.

"None o' your business!" McGruder snarled.

"The old coot don't seem to get it," complained Link. "All he done was to rant about how they gypped him when they sold him the steel."

The pale-featured outlaw girl, Norma, taking a listless turn along the ramp in a robe provided from Maw Barstow's meager store, was an inadvertent listener to this exchange. She seemed inclined to brush by, but suddenly her deep-set eyes glowed with fire.

"It's a joke!" she contributed unexpectedly. "You save me from the law, doctor up my carcass—and for what?"

"Does seem rather futile," agreed Marlin, sympathetically. He reflected that as her hair grew longer she was becoming a great deal more feminine in appearance. The wound in her neck was by now little more than a scar.

Under his scrutiny, her lips tightened and she abruptly walked away.

DuChane's eyes followed until she disappeared behind the curtain which served as a doorway for her sleeping compartment.

"Y'know," he volunteered, "there's something about that kid I could almost tumble for."

"Cut it out!" was Marlin's sharp response.

"What do you mean?"

Marlin did not answer. He was, in fact, puzzled to know why he had spoken.

"I'll tell you what you mean!" DuChane said heatedly. "You've got your eyes on this dame, same as you've had 'em on Sally. Anything that looks like competition gets your nanny. Well, Marlin I'm serving

notice that where women are concerned I do my own picking. The other man's claim-stakes mean nothing to me."

"That's the talk!" approved McGruder. "What the hell! There's enough to go around, not countin' old Eli, and we don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow. I got my eye on that little—"

"Shut up!" blazed Marlin.

He eyed the ex-detective with burning distaste.

He could have reminded them that he was in a position to enforce his edicts, being in possession of the only weapon. They knew this, however, and it was already a source of mounting antagonism.

What had caused him to bristle at signs of interest toward the feminine portion of the party? It wasn't that he wanted any of them for himself, though he sensed a challenge in Sally's eyes and acknowledged that she was desirable in her way. Norma, too, gave promise of becoming attractive as she regained her vitality. But his attitude was inspired by something deeper.

Perhaps it was an instinctive pre-science that man-woman rivalry would inevitably bring trouble. This and a very special feeling that Pearl must be protected in her childlike innocence. The covetous looks with which McGruder regarded her were unmistakable. The very thought of them rankled in Marlin like a sacrilege. Maw Barstow was an efficient watchdog, but the shady detective would stop at nothing he thought

he could get away with.

From this time, DuChané mockingly defied Marlin's half-expressed edict, by ostentatiously "making a play" for both Sally and Norma. His eyes taunted Marlin to do something about it. And Marlin, knowing that he had no reasonable excuse for interfering, could only chafe inwardly and pretend to have no interest in the matter.

The result was that he withdrew more and more into himself, holding aloof from the others, becoming increasingly morose and distant.

CHAPTER X

Seemingly least imaginative of them all, it was odd that Link should be the first to crack under the strain.

From the time of the disclosure that their hull was slowly corroding under the chemical action of the clay, he had appeared frightened and morose. Once or twice, as Marlin approached him on isolated portions of the superstructure, he slunk away in a peculiar manner. One day—for they still called their alternation of sleeping and waking periods a "day"—he failed to show up for meals.

When he did not appear the second day, the group aroused from its apathetic indifference sufficiently to institute a search.

He was crouching behind some packing boxes in the store room, and fled with wild shrieks on being discovered.

He managed to hide himself again, and the search was dropped. Some hours later they discovered him furtively clamboring among the girders overhead.

From this time on, the girders became his abode. His weasel face, nearly hidden by the long growth of hair, peered down at them from odd angles with alert suspicion. He resembled an unkempt monkey clad in tattered shirt and trousers. If they attempted to approach or tried to lure him down, he shrieked and chattered at them, and retreated to more precarious heights, until they desisted, fearful of making him fall.

"Hunger'll bring him down," DuChane said. And it did. During one of the sleep periods, he raided the store room and created such havoc that Maw Barstow formed a habit of leaving his ration of food and water on a box in plain sight.

When all were apparently asleep, he would stealthily slip down and snatch the food, wolfing it like a wild creature, ready to scamper for safety at the slightest noise.

Watching from concealment, Marlin saw him do this a couple of times, but made no effort to trap him.

And for Marlin, there were more important concerns. Isolated from the rest, he sat for hours at a time before the periscope, trying to arrive at some theory regarding their position in space.

One thing was established by now. The sphere had developed a lazy rotation of its own, presenting

its two hemispheres alternately to the sun and giving the surface on which the periscope projected a "day" of about five hours.

Even without visual observation, the shifting heat areas within the globe would have led to the same conclusion. The clay-like coating seemed to have the property of diffusing the sun's rays throughout its mass. Possibly it would have been burned to a crisp on one side without such rotation. The side which was receiving the direct rays radiated a gentle heat through the walls, and this area of radiation traveled slowly around the circumference.

To Marlin, this rotation seemed to deny the activity of the anti-gravity plates, yet the maintenance of gravity indicated that at least they retained some of their function. To account for this seeming paradox and others, he evolved a set of theories. Some he was able to verify.

From the first, he had found it difficult to swallow DuChane's surmise that gravity was maintained within the sphere through some mysterious reaction from the obverse surfaces of the repulsion plates. To satisfy his doubts, he wormed his way through a narrow opening between the hull and girders supporting the super-structure, until he reached the edge of a segmented bank of repulsion plates.

He found them heavily insulated on the upper side, as if to prevent the force from exerting its full strength in that direction. By lying

in a cramped position, he was able to extend an arm through a narrow crevice and to touch the under side of the plates.

His exploring fingers contacted a fragment of some sort—a pebble or hardened lump of clay. Detaching it from the surface, he fingered it exploringly. When his fingers relaxed, the lump escaped and instantly snapped back to the plate, as if held by a taut rubber band. He recovered the fragment and tried the same thing experimentally, with the same result.

There was no mistake. Objects released below the anti-gravity plates dropped toward them, just as did objects released from above. If anything, the attraction of the underside was stronger. In point of fact, the supposed anti-gravity plates were gravity plates.

Convinced of something he had vaguely suspected, Marlin retired to his usual vantage point—the observation scaffold—to think matters out.

He was vaguely disturbed when Sally clambored up the ladder and joined him.

"You're up to something?" she accused. "Tell Sally what it's all about."

"I'd only bore you."

"What's the difference? I'm bored anyway."

She sat beside him on the edge of the platform, bare feet protruding from her threadbare slacks. Marlin was quite certain that she wouldn't

resist if he put his arm around her, but he squelched any such impulse. Too many times he had seen DuChane's arm occupying that position.

"All right," he observed. "You asked for it." He told her what he had discovered.

"Well," she asked, "what of it?"

"This is the way I'd explain it. I think the criticism of Thornboldt's principle, advanced by orthodox scientists, was probably justified. Such an enormous application of energy would be needed to effect the stress required for anti-gravity polarization, that it was a practical impossibility. Yet somehow this enormous power was generated for the brief moment which marked the plunge of our vessel into outer space."

"I think we ought to christen the old ball," she remarked irrelevantly. "How about calling it what Bart suggested—the Thornboldt?"

"I suppose the inventor is entitled to some credit," Marlin agreed absently. "But to figure this out: Let's assume a generator or storage battery capable of delivering current of one ampere strength for a hundred hours. Suppose it should release the same amount of current within a single hour. The strength of the current would obviously be multiplied a hundred times, wouldn't it? Suppose the same current were released in a single minute. It would be multiplied six thousand times. Suppose it were released in a second, what would be

its strength?"

"I'm no good at figures," replied Sally, fidgeting.

"Thirty-six thousand amperes!" Marlin told her impressively. "That's a lot of stepping up. Eli claims his batteries are capable of supplying current for several months, and while I don't know their capacity, it must be considerable. Suppose most of this potential current was drained off by the shell of our vessel, acting like a Leyden jar or accumulator, and then released in one titanic discharge. Don't you see? This must have accomplished the near-impossible—the polarization of the repulsion plates, resulting in the anti-gravity reaction."

"You sure deal out jawbreakers when you get started," Sally shrugged.

"All right," he went on imperturbably. "The intense discharge probably lasted only a moment—but that was sufficient. It shot our sphere away from the earth as if it had been fired from a cannon—sent it with an initial momentum which took us far beyond Earth's attraction and must still be continuing undiminished in the vacuum of space."

Sally yawned and rose. "What you need is a classroom," she said. "I'll pass the word along in case any of the rest feel the need of brushing up on their education."

Her departure scarcely disturbed Marlin's train of thought. His

theory, of course, gave birth to other perplexing problems. How account for the fact that neither sphere nor passengers were crushed by the enormous acceleration?

He had an answer for that one.

Logically, he reasoned, they owed their salvation to the fact that they, too, were subject to the momentary repulsion of the activated plates. Repulsion hurled them violently away—acceleration pressed them back. The two forces practically cancelled out. Possibly the insulation on the upper surfaces of the plates gave acceleration a slight edge, causing the crushing sensation Marlin had felt at the onset of their flight.

But the anti-gravity force was no longer in effect—probably had lasted not more than a few seconds. What had caused the plates to become imbued with an opposite force—an attractive force akin to gravity?

To answer this, Marlin found himself seeking analogies in the realm of electrical phenomena.

A magnet, he reflected, is a bar of iron in which the movements of the molecules are so organized as to keep the lines of their magnetic axis parallel—all the molecular north poles pointing toward the same end of the bar. It is accomplished by placing the bar in a larger magnetic field, and it is made permanent by tempering—which fixes the molecules in permanent alignment.

Thornboldt's atomic polarization principle must be similar. Under

terrific stress, the molecules of the repulsion plates, and their constituent atoms, were polarized in such a way that they exercised the force of repulsion. But when the stress was released, there would be no tempering to maintain the molecular set. They would—in a manner of speaking—snap back, like rubber bands released from tension, not quite to their original condition, but to a condition tending toward the opposite of that occasioned by the stress.

The attractive property now inherent in the plates, in other words, was a reaction from the terrific stress of their momentary anti-gravity polarization.

It was notable that there had been no interruption of the electrical power which supplied current for cooking and waste incineration, operated the air-purifying apparatus and refrigeration plant, and kept their lighting system in force. Evidently, Marlin decided, the storage batteries—if they had been drained of their charges prior to the impulse which hurled them into space—must have recovered, as batteries do when given a rest. He inclined also to the opinion that the sphere itself generated electricity through the expansion and contraction of the outer coating as it slowly revolved.

Sally appeared to avoid him after this encounter—or so Marlin imagined. He had a notion that she had been piqued by DuChane's pursuit of Norma, and wanted to

show the man a thing or two by giving Marlin an opportunity to make love to her. His failure to rise to the bait had not endeared him to her.

He told himself that he did not care—but, in truth, he felt his isolation. It was comforting even to have Pearl creep up to the periscope ledge beside him, as she did at rare intervals. He fell into the habit of talking to her, as a relief from the close-mouthed silence that had grown upon him. It was better, at any rate, than talking to himself, and helped him to orient his ideas.

"Sometimes, Pearl," he confided, "I have a feeling that you sense what I'm trying to say better than I understand it myself. It's cock-eyed—but a fellow develops queer fancies in a weird situation like this."

She smiled amiably.

"I even find myself assuming that you know what's behind all this. I suppose it's your air of calm assurance—or the lucky way you seemed to hit things back there on Earth. And here I go, with another screwy idea—that there is something behind it all."

He applied his eye to the periscope. It was on the night side, and only an impenetrable expanse of blackness, studded with bright, unblinking points of light, rewarded his gaze. Relaxing, he faced the girl.

"Reason tells me that we're the victims of a freakish accident. Yet I find myself assuming——"

He checked the sentence, glancing around selfconsciously for possible eavesdroppers. With a dreamy expression Pearl was looking at—or beyond him.

"It's a comfort to talk to you," he confessed. "You make it easier to express the inexpressible. What was I saying? Oh, yes."

He frowned. "I get to fancying sometimes that the crew of us were brought together, herded into this incredible monstrosity, and then spewed forth in accordance with some age-old plan. It's almost as if the little world we're in had a life of its own and had been sent forth with the blessings of the parent Earth to work out its own destiny. What do you think, Pearl? In your infinite wisdom—or simplicity—tell me. At least it *could* be true."

The girl's lips parted. "It could be true," she echoed.

He shrugged. Often you could get a response from her by making an emphatic effort, but it was usually like this—some amiable repetition of the words you put in her mouth.

"All right," he retorted, as if she had contradicted him, "say that I'm screwy! But tell me—what do we know about other possible states of consciousness? We think we understand human consciousness—because we're experiencing it. We credit animals with consciousness because they act in a limited way like humans. But how do we know there aren't other phases of conscious-

ness? How do we know that a tree isn't a conscious entity, or a rock, or this globe—or the Earth? How do we know?"

"How do we know?" parroted the girl. She smiled up at his tense features, as if trying to please him. Beyond her, in the shadowy obscurity of the girders, he caught a glimpse of Link's monkey-like face peering furtively down at them.

He broke off abruptly. "You're a bad influence, Pearl. You encourage a fellow to voice crazy ideas. First thing I know, I'll be swinging around on girders myself."

CHAPTER XI

McGRUDER, who as a rule evinced little interest in matters beyond eating, sleeping, and following the feminine members of the party with pig-like, calculating eyes, was the one who made the discovery.

He had climbed to the observation scaffold and peeped idly through the periscope. His yell of dismay reverberated through the interior of the vessel.

"We're gonna hit the moon!" he shouted, as the others scrambled into view.

Marlin gained the platform. "What's the idea!" he demanded sharply. "We aren't within a million miles of the moon."

McGruder gulped, gesturing toward the periscope.

Marlin remained glued to the instrument until DuChane cut in roughly: "Give someone else a

chance. What's out there?"

Marlin relinquished his post. His voice sounded unnaturally strained. "See for yourself."

It did look like a shrunken version of the old familiar moon—a gleaming disc shining brilliantly against the inky blackness of space.

"We're approaching a solar body of some sort," Marlin told the others, who had struggled up to the platform. His eyes inadvertently sought Pearl. "Maybe this is the answer to——" He broke off.

DuChane straightened from the eyepiece.

"Two to one it means a crackup," he commented. "Unless Eli knows how to guide this shebang—and I don't believe he does."

Nevertheless, they reported the approaching crisis to the inventor. Eli had grown more eccentric as the voyage continued. His hair and beard were wilder; he talked incoherently.

When he had assured himself that they were actually approaching a stellar body, he displayed a great deal of energy, rushing from periscope to control room and back again; but they had no way of knowing the result of this activity, and received scant satisfaction from his impatient responses to questions.

"My private opinion," Marlin observed, later, "is that his instruments have no more control over this vessel than if we'd left them in that pit back on Earth. All connections must have burned out in that incredible burst of power that

hurled us into space."

But at least, Eli made a great show of adjusting his switches and levers. Whether he planned to effect a landing or was trying to avoid the approaching body, was a secret locked in his own dome-like head.

In time this new menace became commonplace and life lapsed into its dull routine, with Marlin alone spending a great deal of time observing their progress toward the stellar body. On one occasion, Pearl paid him one of her infrequent visits.

He looked up as the girl climbed from the ladder.

"Better run along," he said abruptly. "It's considered bad medicine for you to chin with me."

SHE stopped beside him and cocked her head on one side, for all the world like a bird listening for a worm.

"It is so lonely," she said yearningly.

"You—lonely?" he repeated in surprise. "Didn't know you ever felt that way."

With a suggestion of impatience, she touched the bulging crust of clay surrounding the original entrance hole.

"So lonely," she insisted. "Please let it out."

Not quite sure of her meaning, he picked up a crowbar and tapped the hardened crust. This seemed to be what she desired, for she stood aside expectantly. Cracking the surface, he dislodged a section and

allowed the gummy interior substance to flow out.

The girl smiled her pleasure, then cupped both hands over the soft mass, working them below the surface almost lovingly.

"So lonely," she murmured, in a crooning voice.

When she withdrew her hands, smeared with the gummy exudation, she held a small lump of some kind in her palms. As she rubbed the clay away, Marlin saw with a start that it was a dead field mouse.

This was one of the numerous creatures that had been enmeshed in the sticky clay, he realized. But how had the girl known it was there—close to the surface at this point?

"Better throw it into the incinerator," he advised gently. "Nasty thing. Dead."

Shrinking from his outstretched hand, she cuddled the mire-covered little body to her breast and almost furtively escaped down the ladder.

She had cleaned the bedraggled little corpse and was still cuddling it happily, when Marlin descended to obtain his share of the meager rations. He was struck by the madonna-like expression of the girl's features. Wonderful—the mother instinct—he reflected. Wonderful, yet sometimes pitiful.

DuChane stared as he took his packing-box seat at the table. "Where'd the kid get that?"

"Never you mind," bristled Maw. "She can keep it if she wants to. What harm's it doing, I'd like to know?"

DuChane sniffed the air, as if in anticipation. "About this time tomorrow—if there is such a thing—you'll need no urging. If there's any stink more potent than an over-ripe rodent, I'd hate to find out about it."

"How does it happen," demanded Sally, "that the stuff out there didn't act the way it does when we throw things away?"

"That's a thought!" DuChane agreed. "Whatever we throw away, the shell digests—tin cans, refuse, scraps. But this——" He shrugged. "Just one of those freakish accidents, I suppose."

THE strange aftermath was that when they gathered for another meal, after the usual sleep period, the mouse was standing on its tiny hind legs, daintily nibbling crumbs from Pearl's hand.

"This thing gets more uncanny," DuChane growled. "We were wondering how the stuff came to leave the creature intact. Now we find that it knows the difference between inert objects and those potentially alive. Not only that, but it seems to know how to keep the creatures in suspended animation."

"You talk as if the ship was something alive," observed Sally sharply.

"It's quite possible," Marlin suggested, "to conceive of chemicals in the clay which attack dead tissue, but to which live cells are resistant."

"Intelligent chemicals! That's a hot one!" retorted the girl.

Marlin eyed her calmly. "It's not so farfetched. I can name one chemical right off the bat — just plain water. Put dead vegetation in a damp spot and it decays. Live vegetation draws nourishment and thrives under the same condition."

McGruder eyed with distaste the slender rations set out before him, then glanced up longingly at the enclosing sphere.

"There must be a mess of them dead animals out in that clay. I wouldn't mind havin' a little fresh meat, even if it was only a chipmunk."

The suggestion was received apathetically, but Marlin found himself reflecting that this might offer a not impossible solution of their food problem—presuming that they survived the dwindling stock of canned provisions.

CHAPTER XII

FOR the most part, the vessel had proceeded without producing any sense of motion. A violent shift would have dislodged everything loose in the shell—the scaffolding, ladders, the temporarily secured electric lights—and yet there had been nothing of the sort. Once in a while, they felt a trembling jar. This probably was caused by the impact of a meteorite. But thus far, no such bodies had pierced the heavy insulation of resistant clay.

There was now, however, quite definite indication that they were moving in space. Observations tak-

en at intervals showed that the "moon" was coming closer. Presently, the irregularities on the edge of the disc were apparent to the eye, and shadowy configurations on its rocky surface could be discerned.

After some days, Marlin developed a new suspicion.

He checked his observations carefully. There was no doubt about it. They were no longer approaching the mass but were drifting in an orbit around it—either that, or it was rotating around the sphere. And about this time he made a further discovery. A second body had appeared in the heavens—and presently there was a third.

"There's only one explanation," he reported tersely at a mealtime gathering. "We're in the asteroid belt."

DuChane alone seemed to know what this meant.

"Dave seems to be jumping at conclusions, but assuming that he's right, we've swung out beyond the orbit of Mars—somewhere between it and Jupiter. There's a region of small planets, masses of rock, ranging up to four or five hundred miles in diameter. Supposed to be fragments of a planet that broke up somehow."

"Or didn't quite jell in the making," corrected Marlin. "I believe that's the modern scientific view. More than nine hundred of them have been charted though I've no doubt there must be innumerable smaller fragments."

"What's the chance of our gettin' through without bein' hit?" demanded McGruder.

"How should I know? As a matter of fact, I don't think we're on our way through. Looks as if we've established an orbit — at least around that big one."

"Anything we can do about it?"

Marlin regarded him impersonally.

"Nothing," he said. "Exactly nothing. We've no more control over our fate at present than we've had since we started."

Sally gave a mirthless laugh. "That makes it swell! All we've got to do is wait—and wait—and see what this old ball intends to do with us."

Pearl volunteered a remark which, in its unexpectedness, caused them all to look at her.

"So many stones," she breathed. "Lonely stones."

DuChane leaped to his feet.

"The girl knew!" he shouted. "She knew! We thought she was talking gibberish, but she was telling us where we'd wind up. Stones! Lonely stones! Asteroids!"

"Of course Pearl knows!" crowed Maw Barstow. "Didn't I tell you?"

Norma rarely took part in their discussions. She spoke now with bitter conviction. A flush of intensity lighted her wan features.

"It was all intended! I could feel it when I lay there in my stupor—just as if I was a part of it and knew where we were going and why. It's a soulless thing! We don't

mean anything to it—not any more than grubs. This is only the beginning—it's going to be more and more terrible. We'll be ground to fragments——"

She closed her lips and stared, shudderingly, as if into space.

McGruder eyed her with resentment. "It's a lot of hogwash," he asserted with hollow confidence.

THE nine days' wonder of it gradually became commonplace to the rest, but Marlin spent a greater share of his waking time at the observation post. The three moons were joined by more. There were presently a number of gleaming bodies revolving around the sphere, the count increasing almost at every revolution. At one time, Marlin counted eighteen of fairly good size and no doubt several were out of range of the periscope.

The strangeness of it was slowly borne upon him.

"Why should these planetoids be revolving around us?" he questioned. "They're reputed to have eccentric orbits, but we seem to have barged in on a small system revolving around one common center. And the most cockeyed thing of all is that we're apparently that center."

There might be some other explanation, but the reasonable one seemed to be that the vessel was swinging through the vast planetoid belt, "picking up" stellar bodies as it approached them. Each rock concretion drawn into the ever-

growing system increased its mass attraction for other bodies, and thus the accumulation grew, like an immense snowball.

Theoretically, there was support for the assumption. The plates within the sphere exercised an attraction which approximated Earth gravity. Normally, the attraction of so small an object in space would have been slight, but thus augmented, it might act as a magnet, drawing much larger bodies out of their natural orbits.

"Still, if that's the case," he reasoned, "they'd keep drawing closer. They'd eventually crush our sphere by the very force of its own gravity."

His mind pictured a churning mass of mountainous and smaller rocks, rolling round and round each other in ever-narrowing orbits, crashing and grinding together, probably generating heat in the process, eventually fusing into a solid mass.

"Nice prospect," he reflected with a shudder. "Where'll we be when that takes place? Somewhere near the center, from all indications."

The prospect revealed through the periscope was awe-inspiring, but increasingly fearsome. For one exciting hour, Marlin watched while two planetoids collided and slowly ground each other to fragments. On another occasion, a huge mass lazily crossed his field of vision so close that he could discern great areas of what looked like ice, mingled with towering spires of rock. He could

easily imagine himself looking down on a mountain glacier.

"Why not?" he reflected. "There's no reason why there shouldn't be frozen water in this debris. Presumably the general mass is constituted of the same rock, minerals, and gases as the other planets, including Earth. Some of it could be frozen air — or its constituent gases — considering the absolute zero out there."

He recalled reading the contention of Halbfass that some earth hailstorms originate in outer space. The scientist had produced considerable data in support of his theory that such bombardments may be of stellar origin. There was the case of an iceberg twenty feet in diameter, reported from Dharwar, India, in 1838, and a still earlier case of a block of ice "as big as an elephant" which reputedly fell in the same region during the days of Tip-poo Sahib.

Unless Marlin was mistaken there were celestial icebergs among the growing mass of planetary debris circling the sphere.

The picture he had envisioned of the planetoid bodies closing in on the sphere, with its augmented gravitation, had seemed at first fantastic. It was taking on more and more the aspect of grim, threatening reality.

Collisions between bodies in the surrounding space became more frequent as their orbits definitely spiraled inward. Once a fragment drifted so close that it almost seem-

ed to graze the sphere. As Marlin tensed for the seemingly inevitable impact, it passed by. But on its return would it not be materially closer?

That particular fragment did not return. Perhaps it collided with another and was pulverized or deflected from its course. But the sphere might not escape so easily the next time.

Occasionally, his vision would be obscured by what seemed to be a cloud of dust. It was undoubtedly just that—a field of particles from the grinding and colliding of rock masses, settling toward the gravitational pull of the sphere. On another occasion, the obscuring cloud appeared to be sleet—a mass of iceberg fragments, or perhaps more tenuous gas in solidified form.

SINCE that one shuddering outburst, Norma had seemingly regained her self-control. She appeared only occasionally at meal times, tight-lipped, reserved. Often Marlin saw her standing on a secluded part of the superstructure, wrapped in her moody thoughts. She climbed one day to the observation platform beside him.

"What can you see through that thing?" she asked.

"Take a look," he invited. "It's terrifying, but inspiring too—when you reflect that mortal eyes never looked upon it before."

She studied the awesome prospect for a minute, then drew away, shivering as if with cold.

"Give it to me straight," she demanded. "What's the payoff? Here we are in a thin-shelled bubble floating through a tumble of jagged rocks and icebergs. They're drawing closer all the time, aren't they?"

He temporized. "My biggest worry right now is that the dust fragments, settling down on us, will bury the periscope head. That will be the last of our observations."

"I said give it to me straight," she retorted.

"All right. Your guess is as good as mine. Frankly, it looks like the end. But it looked like the end when we shot off into space. Somehow we've existed up to now." He spoke impersonally, trying to keep the sympathy he felt out of his voice: "Come to think, Norma, I'm puzzled——"

He stopped, but she finished for him.

"You can't understand why a person who's been through what I have should get the willies now. I'm not afraid of something I can fight. I'm not afraid of dying. It's eerie things you can't fight that get me. Hearing that girl Pearl talk gives me the creeps. She calls this a 'little world.' What does she mean?"

Marlin started. He had used the term himself; probably that was how it came to fall from Pearl's lips.

"I know what she means," Norma answered her own question vehemently. "It is a little world. I was a part of it, I tell you, while I lay there between life and death.

I sensed things through its consciousness—if you can imagine such a thing. I knew what all of you were doing, just as if you were maggots crawling around inside of me. I had a feeling of what it was bound for—this grinding and crushing and churning in space. And we're no more to it than the mice and bugs that happened to get mired in the sticky clay while it was forming."

Marlin looked at her blankly. Despite her vehemence, she had herself under control—though at the cost of what effort he could only guess. The strange thing was that he himself had been subject to like fancies.

"Natural forces are—rather impersonal," he conceded.

"I hate natural forces! I hate this little world and everybody in it! Why did you help pull me back to life? I never wanted to live. I could have kicked off in a gunfight and had no beef. But here we're helpless like rats in a trap. Why don't we all kill ourselves and get it over with?"

Marlin shrugged. It was pleasanter talking to Pearl. Her unruffled poise almost amounted to an assurance that nothing could happen which particularly mattered.

ON her next visit, with Norma's outburst fresh in mind, he reverted to the subject Pearl had once inspired.

"That idea about the world hav-

ing a consciousness of its own may not be altogether screwy," he told her. "It would explain a lot of things that we take for granted. As an entity, it might very logically take a hand in the involvement of beings in its sphere of influence. Our surface life—the flora and fauna, including man—no doubt play an essential part in its evolution. The Earth entity, with its natural forces—the winds, tides, changes of temperature, volcanic eruptions, and such like—could easily direct the spread of these forms.

"Come to think—that's just what it has been doing, from the dawn of life. The only question is whether it happened by intention. Of course, I'm too much of a reasoning creature to believe such rot."

He stopped, half-awaiting the echoed response, "Such rot," but it was not forthcoming. From a pocket in the girl's soiled dress where she kept her strangely revived pet, a pair of beady eyes looked out at him brightly.

"All right, maybe I shouldn't have said a reasoning creature, but a skeptical creature. After all, it's as unreasonable to disbelieve as to believe—when you have no proof either way. Well, let's assume that you're right."

"Pearlie is right," she assured him.

"H'mm. Maybe so. Well, assuming all this, I suppose the same entity could carry the process further and cause all the activities of so-called civilization. It could stir

up the restlessness that sends explorers and colonists to distant parts of the globe. It could inspire persecutions, such as those that drove the Pilgrim fathers across the ocean. It could drive men through greed, lust of conquest—any number of urges. War — perhaps that's Nature's way of purging elements she wants to get rid of, or preparing for some new stage of development. Which brings the topic down to us."

He glanced at her, half expecting a response, but she merely smiled in her vaguely knowing way.

"We all seemed to be free agents," he went on, "but somehow we drifted toward old Eli's shelter—a bunch of misfits that weren't of any particular use in Earth's economy. What financiers not under some strange influence would have invested in Eli's wild theories? And that pit of encrusted mire where the old coot was led to build his sphere. Who knows what substances were brought together by what we call natural forces, and mixed into the right composition to protect us for this dash across space?"

The sphere gave a trembling lurch. Something had brushed its surface, but in his intensity he scarcely noticed.

"There are only two ways of looking at it," he declared, breathing heavily. "Either the whole thing was a freakish combination of accidents, or—it was consciously directed. I'm just sufficiently space-

struck to entertain the possibility that it might be conscious purpose. What do you say, Pearl? Accident—or purpose?"

"Or purpose," she assured him dutifully.

He gave a short laugh. "That was hardly fair. I should have phrased it the other way around, knowing your fondness for repeating last words."

CHAPTER XIII

MARLIN regretted afterward that he had not attempted to offer Norma some antidote for her moody thoughts on her visit to his observation point. He might have tried to put in words his own fatalistic point of view. Possibly it would have helped to sustain her. If only he had been less preoccupied—

But it was useless to regret, when they found the girl stretched out on her sleeping pallet with eyes rigidly staring upward.

They gathered in silence around the inert form. Death had been their constant companion from the start, but this was the first time it had shown its grim face.

Maw Barstow began a low wailing. Sally also wept. McGruder moistened his lips and looked furtively around, cowering slightly as he saw the eerie features of Link peering from the shadows above. DuChane stood stricken but expressionless. Pearl alone, of those who looked down at the still face,

was seemingly unmoved.

"I seen her pokin' around in the medicine cabinet," McGruder recalled. "She musta swallowed some kinda dope."

They searched through the cabinet, but there was no clue as to what the girl had taken. Several bottles contained drugs which could have caused death.

"Oughta be given a decent burial," McGruder commented.

No move was made at the time to carry out his suggestion. The only burial possible was through the locks provided for eliminating waste products. The thought was abhorrent.

"She talked kind of wild about ending it all," gulped Sally. "Said she could almost hate me for being the one to save her for this. Gosh! I even came back at her with a wisecrack—something about its being a good idea. To end it all, I mean."

DuChane spoke for the first time. "Moody sort of kid," he commented hesitantly. "Didn't seem to have a real interest in life."

"You tried hard enough to give her one!" Sally retorted with pent-up bitterness. "Too bad she wouldn't tumble."

DuChane opened his lips as if to reply, swallowed, then, with a lingering glance at the dead girl, turned away.

Eli was not among the silent group. No one bothered to tell him that his passenger list had been reduced by one.

The event seemed to do something to the morale of the survivors — something beyond producing the inevitable shock that follows in the wake of death.

Marlin felt it keenly. Until now —though he had imagined himself to be impersonal and philosophical about the whole matter—he had been sustained by a feeling that they were being carried on this strange journey for a purpose. There had been Pearl's predictions and their apparent realization—the uncanny fortuitousness of natural forces which had preserved them thus far. It had seemed to presage intention of some kind—suggesting that they bore charmed lives.

Now, it seemed, the charm was not inviolate. They were no longer the favorites of some mysterious destiny. One had been snuffed out—the others could be. There was no purpose back of it—none, at any rate, which concerned them. As Norma had said, they were like insects caught up in the mud-ball. It was merely by chance that any had survived thus far.

The question of what to do with the dead girl's body was settled by the decision to cremate it. The waste incinerator was electrically heated and connected with a lock, originally intended to open into space, through which ashes and solid residue could be forced into the clay outer coating.

Though Maw Barstow protested and wailed, she had no counter suggestion to offer. DuChane held

aloof from the discussion, but when Marlin called on McGruder to pick up one end of the blanket-swathed figure, DuChane thrust himself between them and gathered the body in his arms.

"I'll take care of this," he said gruffly.

A sense of bleak desolation swept over Marlin, as he watched the other man, with his somber burden, slowly ascend the ramp toward the blackened door of the incinerator.

At this moment the blow struck.

The concussion was so terrific that it sent Marlin sprawling the full length of the ramp. He brought up against a hard surface, dazed and gasping, and lay inert for a period that might have been minutes, vaguely aware of the darkness, of shrieks, and the crash of falling bodies.

Painfully, at length, he picked himself up.

As the sphere continued to heave and vibrate from the impact, someone fell against him. Clutching arms caught at him and a voice—Sally's—sobbed convulsively in his ears.

He disengaged the clinging arms.

"Cut it out!" he said gruffly. "We're still alive—I don't know why. Let's see if we can find any lights."

Half dragging the girl after him, he made his way to the storeroom. He remembered a drawer containing flashlights. Several were broken, but he located a couple in working

order.

Above the general clamor, the howls of someone apparently in agony rose with monotonous regularity. With the aid of the flashlights, he stumbled toward the sound, Sally following. Overhead the girders groaned and clanked with metallic reverberations. Several of them must have been fractured.

By the feeble radiance of the torches, he located the source of the agonized howls. Above the level of the observation scaffold—now a mass of tumbled wreckage—the gummy substance of the outer coating was issuing inexorably through a rent in the shell. Trapped in the deluge was Slinky Link—his face distorted with animal-like terror, one free arm pawing helplessly at the engulfing tide.

Marlin hastily sought a way of reaching him, but before he could salvage a ladder the demented creature was beyond help. His howls abruptly ended in a gurgle as the eruption relentlessly closed over him.

Sally was suddenly very sick.

McGruder, and then DuChane stumbled toward the light.

"Wha—what happened?" came the befuddled question.

"We were struck, of course. Help me get Sally back to her bunk. The stuff—swallowed up Link. Where are the others?"

They found Pearl sitting in a corner with Maw's head in her lap. She was gently smoothing the older woman's brow, which bore an

ugly welt. Maw was groaning, but apparently more in fright than pain.

MARLIN swept his flashlight over them, decided they were in need of no immediate attention. "Let's see whether we can restore the lights."

In the control room, they came upon Eli's body wedged between two banks of coils, his head twisted in a ghastly fashion. He must have died instantly, his neck broken by the concussion.

Tentative efforts to restore electrical current were without avail. They located a few more undamaged flashlights and inspected the vessel.

The first assumption had been that the dent knocked in their hull by impact with the asteroid occurred at the point where Link had been overtaken by the flood. It became apparent, however, that the blow had struck on the opposite side of the vessel, where a much greater inundation had occurred—was, in fact, still in process of spreading over the interior surface like a great blister.

Link must have been flung against the hull from the girders on which he was roosting. His body broke through the weakened shell, and once the ooze had him it closed over him with implacable greed.

The utter hopelessness of their position weighed on the three men like a pall.

Any lingering faith that they were protected by a special provi-

dence was shattered. Already, three of their number had proved that death could strike as aimlessly and without warning in the space vessel as elsewhere.

The ooze was working in through innumerable cracks in the rotten shell. From serving as their protection against the cold of outer space and the burning heat of the sun's rays, the covering had assumed the guise of a soulless monster, spreading its ravening tentacles to smother and devour them.

DuChane's memory of the concussion was vague. The dead girl's body, wrested from his arms, must have hurtled against the shell, breaking through and being swallowed up in the same manner as Link's.

"Probably better that way," he observed gruffly. "More like a human burial. Wonder if any of that hooch escaped."

There had been an unwritten law that the small stock of liquor among the stores should be preserved for emergencies. Surreptitious violations there might have been, particularly by Maw Barstow, but no open drinking. Marlin shrugged.

"I guess we all feel pretty shaky and exhausted," he acknowledged.

The bottled items in the larder had been packed to withstand shocks. While there was some breakage, most of the liquor had survived.

The three downed a couple of rounds in gloomy silence; then,

with scarcely a word, they stumbled to their bunks.

CHAPTER XIV.

MARLIN woke with a smothering sensation and a foreboding. Fumbling for his flashlight, he sought the others.

Maw Barstow was snoring stertorously in her cubbyhole. Pearl, who should have occupied the pallet next to her, was gone. Sally, pale from the retching she had endured, was sleeping fitfully.

In the storeroom, he found DuChane, lying in a stupor beside an empty bottle. There were several empties, in fact. DuChane and McGruder must have returned to make a night of it. But McGruder was nowhere in sight.

With a grunt of distaste, Marlin turned his attention to the hull. It was progressively deteriorating. The blow had ruptured the corroded shell-plates in numerous places, and they were constantly giving way under the shifting stresses.

His thoughts returned to Pearl. Strange that he had not come across the girl. He made an unavailing search of the staterooms, storerooms, the control room, and all passages and aisles of the unsteady superstructure.

A taut feeling constricted his chest. She was so defenseless in her childish simplicity. She might have wandered out in the dark and fallen from any one of a dozen or more points of danger he could

imagine. Memory of the fate that had overtaken Link, and presumably Norma's body, caused him to shudder.

From searching the likely places, he fell to searching the unlikely ones. His flashlight beam unexpectedly picked up the two of them—Pearl and McGruder—in a segment between the outcurving hull and the end-wall of the cabin-like structure containing their sleeping compartments. The narrow crevice between the corner of the straight wall and the hull made it an almost inaccessible retreat.

In the brief glimpse Marlin caught before McGruder turned his startled, snarling face toward the flashlight, the whole story was apparent.

McGruder had pursued the girl and finally cornered her. She was struggling to escape from his grasp.

The man cringed away from the light. "Get outa here!" he yelled hoarsely. "This don't concern you."

"No?" Marlin spoke with deadly intensity. "Take your hands off that girl."

"Says who?"

"I've still got the gun, McGruder—and I don't mind admitting that I've itched all along for an excuse to use it on your carcass. Let go, damn you!"

McGruder jerked the girl roughly around so that she offered a shield for his body.

"Come ahead—shoot!" he taunted.

Marlin pocketed his gun. "I'm

coming after you."

The lower part of the crevice was too narrow to admit his body, but it widened out above, where the hull sloped away from the wall. Pearl could have squeezed through at the floor level, but McGruder must have had to inch himself up a couple of feet before he could follow her. Methodically, Marlin set out to do the same.

THE feat required both hands, and McGruder seized the opportunity, when Marlin had squirmed himself part way up, to release the girl and plunge toward him with clenched fist. Marlin saved himself from a paralyzing blow in the midriff by leaping backward.

He snatched for the gun, but before he could recover it, McGruder was well back inside, again using Pearl for a shield.

"Smart guy!" he yelled tauntingly. "Coming in, are you!"

This time, Marlin held his flashlight in one hand and the automatic in the other, training both on McGruder, while he slowly worked himself up the angle formed by the two walls by pressure of his outthrust knees and elbows.

McGruder, eyes glittering, backed away, still holding the bewildered girl before him. Slowly, keeping the gun and flashlight trained upon him, Marlin squeezed his bulk through the crevice.

The vessel gave one of its now frequent lurches, groaning with the strain on yielding hull and weaken-

ed girders. In that instant, Marlin felt a movement of the two steel walls as they spread apart. He would have fallen if he had not involuntarily spread his elbows and shoulders to maintain his position. The next instant, the walls closed in on him, crushing—crushing—squeezing the life out of his body.

Even in that agonized moment, a horrified gasp escaped his lips, at what was revealed by the stabbing ray of the flashlight.

The heaving side of the vessel tightened cruelly, then released him from its vice-like grip. Limp with pain, Marlin dropped heavily to the floor within the narrow enclosure.

He lay for a moment gasping for breath, neither knowing nor caring whether any bones were cracked. Then he gathered himself for a supreme effort. His body was one solid ache as tortured muscles strained to obey his will.

"Look!" he gasped hoarsely, flashlight pointing. "Look — behind——!"

McGruder, struggling dazedly to his feet with the girl still clutched in his embrace, swung around at the warning, but it was already too late. A great seam had opened in the hull directly behind him, and a mass of ooze was pouring in, like a surge of lava.

Caught off-balance, he stumbled and slipped on one knee in the encroaching tide. As he floundered and slipped on one knee in the engulfed.

A bellow like that of a mired

bull escaped his distorted lips. He was gripped tenaciously by the pitiless exudation. His eyes roved frantically. Then, as Marlin dragged himself partly erect, he saw McGruder do an incredible thing.

Desperately, the detective twisted himself half around, with the girl in his arms, and forced her into the viscous tide. She struggled in a faintly bewildered manner. Bracing himself against her body, he gained a leverage which enabled him to release, first one foot and then the other. As he stumbled free, the girl was engulfed, almost before she could cry out.

In that moment of horror, Marlin was conscious only of a consuming rage—a lust to kill that obliterated all else. Forgetful of the automatic, he dived toward McGruder, with hands that had suddenly become claws.

"Don't! Don't! We've got to squeeze out of here! Before it catches——"

McGruder's screaming protest was strangled as ruthless fingers closed around his windpipe.

When the smothering ooze closed over both heaving bodies, Marlin was scarcely aware, through the red fury of his demoniac rage, that the end had come . . .

. . . "But, mother, the goddesses were all beautiful, were they not?"

"Yes, son, but *Pi-Ruh-Al* was the most beautiful."

"Then why do the carvings always show *Sa-Hala-Lee* with a face,

while *Pi-Ruh-Al* has none? I would think——"

"Hush child! The beauty of *Pi-Ruh-Al* was so dazzling that no mortal might look upon it. Even the gods could scarce endure its splendor, and no sculptor has dared presume to represent her features. Not so with *Sa-Hala-Lee*, who is the goddess of N'urthly beauty and constancy. A touching legend relates to the manner by which she was wooed by *Mah-Gurru-Dah*, Lord of the East, patron of the forge. He was forced to wound her sore unto death with a lightning bolt forged in his smithy before she yielded—but thereafter she remained loyal with a faithfulness beyond mortal understanding. Yea, though it is reputed that both *Maha-Ra-Lin* and *Bar-Du-Chan* sought her because of her siren-like allure, she repulsed them with scorn.

"Thus wrote the prophets of old: 'In the beginning was *El-Leighi*, dweller in the sun, who looked upon the sea of space and saw that it was a void, barren of all things. And *El-Leighi* hurled forth his thunderbolt and created a sphere of matter within that void. And he cast his thunderbolts again and yet again until he had created many spheres which circled slowly through the emptiness of space.

"*El-Leighi* looked upon his work, yet was not satisfied. Four of his bolts had formed spheres revolving so close to the sun that its rays scorched them with heat unbearable. Others—the mightiest bolts of all—

formed planets immeasurably far away, lost in frigid coldness.

"So once again El-Leighi gathered his forces and hurled a thunderbolt into space. And on that thunderbolt rode great beings — gods inferior only to El-Leighi himself—whom he commanded to create a world on which life might exist.

"When the thunderbolt shattered, in a temperate region of space beyond the fourth planet, these gods fulfilled their destiny by gathering its fragments and out of them creating a new world. . . ."

CHAPTER XV

FROM a narrow strip of shore that fringed a murky sea, sheer cliffs rose—black, beetling, forbidding. In one direction the rampart lost itself in the haze of a bleak horizon; in the other it merged into a rocky but sloping ascent.

The sea itself was of a muddy hue, reflecting feebly the rays of a sun which seemed to begrudge what little warmth it spared. The sky, gray though nearly cloudless, seemed overcast with a dusty haze.

Where the sea washed into a narrow inlet at the foot of the last great promontory along the line of ramparts, a boulder—distinguished from others because it seemed grayer, smoother, more friable—contributed to the muddiness of the sea.

Each time the tide rose and the waters swept over it, they softened and dissolved some of its outer

coating. As the tides receded, they left a blob of mud, which slowly hardened through exposure to the sun, only to soften and disintegrate a trifle more at the next return of the tide.

It was an irregular tide. Its surges occurred in unpredictable cycles and in varying degrees of intensity. On a few occasions its high level reached a mark far up the cliff; on others it forgot to recede for a time; and yet again it was such a feeble tide that it barely washed the base of the boulder, which was in reality a clod of hard-baked clay.

Now and again, after the tide receded, some furry object lay gasping in the sun, and presently scuttled toward the less precipitous stretch of shore. Or a bird fluttered to the rampart, or a cricket vented a dismal chirp and sought the damp underside of a rock. In a nearby cleft, a scattering of seeds had been caught in the backwash of tide and blades of grass clung tenaciously to a meager deposit of soil.

How long the sea had washed this blob of clay could only have been estimated by some observer who noted its size when it was first carried down to water level in a rock slide, and watched the progress of its disintegration. But there was no observer to note these things.

There came a day—a day like many another, cloudless, murky, cold—when it would have been apparent, had such an observer ex-

isted, that imbedded within the blob of mud was a foreign object. It might have been a log, for all the amorphous outlines revealed. Whatever it was, the water continued to wash at intervals over the coating, and gradually carried it away. As this continued, the uncovered portions of whatever lay within gradually seemed to lose their gray, desiccated look.

And there came another day when the coating was gone, and after the tide had receded and the sun had poured its rays down with unusual warmth for some hours, a quiver ran through the outstretched object.

The tide returned. As it gently lapped the figure on the sands, some instinct of preservation stirred in that which had been nothing but a core of foreign matter in a blob of clay. It shivered slightly and squirmed to a higher position on the shore.

When the tide next returned, the creature, born of a mud clod was hunched in a sitting position, gazing with dull, uncomprehending eyes at the bleak prospect which was coming into focus before it.

. . . Just when awareness of himself returned to Dave Marlin, he could not have told. There was a borderline phase in which a bewildered, naked creature stumbled along the rocky shore with only vague consciousness of self. Memories of the past mingled fantastically with the present. Impressions of an endless journey, of a

huddled group within a shadowy interior, of black, star-studded vistas, were intertwined with breaking waves, a sense of chill discomfort, and a dull yearning toward the coppery disc that hung in the mist overhead.

GNAWING hunger in his vitals gradually thrust the present into dominance. He dropped down and drank thirstily of the lapping fresh water sea. This partly appeased the discomfort, but a grub which he pounced upon a moment later satisfied it more. Eagerly he set about finding other objects to still that ever-present hunger.

Instinctively the man had turned toward the less precipitous region. Grim and forbidding though it was, it bore some evidence of life—increasingly more evidences on the rocky hillocks that receded from the barren shore. There were clumps of grass and bushes, an occasional bird winging overhead and here and there glimpses of squirrels, chipmunks, and other small animals.

A tawny streak flashed through the bush. At the squeal of its victim, Marlin dived toward the spot, frightened the creature from its kill, and hungrily appropriated the squirrel. In the moment of satisfying his ravenous hunger with the warm bleeding flesh, he was troubled by no memories of the process to which flesh was subjected before eating, in that shadowy former existence.

Somehow he lived, aimlessly wandering, sleeping, when darkness

came, in the shelter of the moment, constantly alert for something to appease the gnawing within him. More frequently than not, he went hungry, for the region was sparse in its vegetation and niggardly in sentient life. He chewed on roots, eagerly pounced on insect larvae, now and then caught or killed with rocks some of the small animals and birds that his unceasing search flushed from cover.

It is doubtful whether he at any time thought clearly, "I am Dave Marlin, a man, who once lived on a planet called Earth." His mind was far behind his body in recovering from the paralysis of disuse.

A new excitement stirred him one day. Farther inland, a thin column of smoke was rising. Smoke! The ascending smudge wakened something within him. Smoke was connected with that former life. It meant the presence of his own kind!

He climbed toward it with frantic eagerness and presently looked down into a sheltered cleft of a valley. By his former standards it would have seemed a barren strip indeed, but in comparison with the terrain surrounding, it was an Eden.

Grass and scraggly bushes struggled for foothold on the hillsides. A brook trickled through the bottom and its banks revealed crude attempts at cultivation. Stunted growths that looked like corn stalks straggled across a narrow field. A gaunt heifer was tethered on one slope.

The smoke rose from a smolder-

ing fire on a blackened area in front of the cave. In the mouth of the cave squatted a woman, clothed in a shapeless garment of skins, suckling a scrawny infant.

Incoherent choking sounds came from Marlin's throat as he descended upon this scene of domestic tranquility. At his approach, the woman glanced up, gave a shrill cry, and disappeared into the cave.

From a crevice beyond appeared a man, likewise clad in skins, brandishing a crooked stick. At sight of Marlin, he stopped in his tracks, then scampered toward the cave, turning at the entrance as if to make a last desperate stand.

Marlin came on with eager stride, but he stopped a few feet away and the two looked at each other.

THE cave dweller was undersized, bearded, and shaggy. His arms and legs protruded in ungainly fashion from the ill-fashioned skin garment. Something about the manner in which the sharp eyes gleamed at him through a tangle of overhanging hair struck a chord in Marlin's memory.

"You're—you're Link!" he said thickly. The words came with difficulty from unaccustomed lips. "Slinky Link! Remember? I'm—Marlin."

The woman's head emerged cautiously from behind her man. The scarred lip again prompted Marlin's memory.

"Maw—Barstow!"

"What you want?" demanded

Link. The words were thickly spoken, as if he, too, rarely used his speech organs.

Truly Marlin did not know what he wanted. Nothing, perhaps, beyond the association of his own kind. For the first time he realized that he was cold. He approached the smoldering embers and knelt over them, gratefully warming himself in the glow.

The other two eyed him resentfully, but when the sun sank low they prepared a frugal meal and grudgingly offered him a portion. He ate greedily of the hard, gritty cake of ground corn and morsel of half-cooked flesh; smacked his lips over the swallow or two of thin milk which they allowed him to drink from a crudely formed earthen cup.

The urge to talk was strong within Marlin—to exchange views with these, perhaps the only members of his kind in all the region. But memories of the old life and speculations as to the manner of their arrival seemed to have little reality in the minds of the two. Maw was brooding and taciturn, wrapped in an animal-like concern for her scrawny infant. Link vaguely recalled that they had wandered until they came to this valley, where it was somehow easier to wrest an existence than on the outer slopes.

He had found two half-starved cattle, captured one, and Maw made him keep it alive for its milk. The other was a bull, but so far it had eluded his attempts at capture. He

had learned to make fire, the primitive way, through striking certain kinds of rock together.

These were his preoccupations. He quickly tired of the conversation and crawled into the cave to sleep.

In the morning, there was less to eat. When Marlin sought to help himself to the fresh milking, Maw snatched the clay vessel and scuttled with it into the cave.

Link thrust a piece of stringy meat into Marlin's hands, then caught up his stick and brandished it threateningly.

"This is our place," he snarled. "You go."

Marlin crammed the partly cooked flesh into his mouth.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Eat too much," was the laconic response.

Marlin reflected on this. He had not eaten much, but the little tasted good, and he wanted to stay.

"Go," insisted Link, prodding with his stick. He added as an afterthought, "You're uncovered—don't look nice."

Marlin looked down at his sun-browned body. In that vaguely remembered former existence he had worn clothes. Now he was naked. The thought shamed him. Disconsolately, he turned and plodded away.

Thereafter, the recovery of his brain cells was more rapid. The old earth life still seemed incredibly remote—as detached as though it belonged to another person — but

upon its vague memories he drew in order to create a more satisfying existence.

He fashioned crude cutting implements and spears by chipping stones and fitting them to handles made from tough growths of brush. He learned deft ways of making fire, and usually cooked his meat. He pieced together an abbreviated garment of skins. Each day he developed new adaptations to the harsh environment.

Usually, he was too tired to think of anything beyond the physical needs of the moment, but now and then, after a meal of unusual repletion, he lay on his back and gazed thoughtfully at the coppery sun, or at the two small moons which, with their uncoordinated orbits, created such eccentricity in the tides. Then he recalled incidents of the past, of the strange journey in the clay-covered sphere, and speculated as to the mystery of his coming to this bleak new world—of the manner of its creation.

WAKING one morning, he was startled to find that a fire had been built and there was an odor of scorching meat. Erect in one bound, he stared incredulously at the other man who was nonchalantly making free with his camp.

"Kinda surprised—eh?"

For a moment, Marlin did not know the long-haired, bearded, skin-clad stranger. He peered uncertainly.

"You're—you're DuChane, aren't

you?"

"The old maestro himself," grinned the other. "Came across your trail two days ago. Campfires — footprints. Nearly caught up with you last night, but the dark overtook me. Guess we're the sole survivors."

"No," Marlin told him. "Maw Barstow and Link — I ran across them back there." He waved an arm vaguely.

"Maw and Slinky Link!" DuChane laughed uproariously. "That's good. Is the little shrimp still balmy?"

Marlin scratched his head. "I'd forgotten that. Guess he got over it, in a way. They've got a kid—and a cow. Kicked me out on my ear."

It was good to have companionship. Talking things over made things clearer. For one thing, he hadn't been able to understand at all how he came to be wandering over the face of this strange planet. "Last thing I remember was struggling with someone—and the ooze closing over. Then I found myself stumbling along this coastline."

DuChane stared. "Don't you know?"

He took Marlin down to a sheltered cove. "There's a type of clay formation—you get so you can spot it by the color—and where there's one chunk you'll usually find several. Look for them above the tide level. Most of those below that line have been dissolved away. Here's a sample."

He took the small lump of clay—it seemed as hard-baked as earthenware—and immersed it in a pool.

"It'll take some time. We might look for more."

In the end, they deposited several of the fragments in the pool, and late in the day small objects began drifting to the surface.

"The clay dissolves. Seems to be somewhat porous and the moisture seeps through to what's inside. Recognize this?" He fished in the pool and laid an inert insect on the bank.

"Cricket," observed Marlin. "I remember——" His thoughts reverted to a small creature that someone—he could not quite recall who—had resurrected from the sticky ooze back in that shadowy interior.

"This'll do the same," declared DuChane. "See. Its legs are twitching already. Here's something larger." He fished out a bedraggled bird.

"Then this is how it all came about?" queried Marlin. He swept the landscape with an inclusive gesture. "These birds—squirrels—Link's cow and the bull. You and I?"

"Sure thing. And the vegetation. The clay is rich in seeds. Everything that blew into that pit stuck." DuChane raked the surface of the water and held the gathered scum in his palm so that Marlin could see. "Seeds. Insects and larvae. Must have been washing out and drying and blowing over the landscape—taking root—for years."

"How many?"

DuChane shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. I think we'll find that the shell broke up along this stretch of coastline and all the life of the planet is concentrated here. It must have commenced releasing the life it brought as soon as the water reached it."

"But before that—how long—? The clay is hard as rock!"

"Dave—that's something to think about. I've an idea it was terribly long. That earth of ours—for all we know man finished his evolution there—billions of our kind were born and died—while we lay in the chrysalis waiting for conditions to ripen. Worlds aren't finished in a day—unless you're thinking of cosmic days. Not even when it's a case of gathering up the debris of an asteroid belt and molding it into a planet—a New Earth."

Marlin stared. His mind sought to envision the slow natural processes that would achieve such a result.

"It's not hard to conceive," continued DuChane reflectively. "Earth scientists generally agreed that the original life spores reached our system from distant parts of the galaxy. When you think of the distances and eons of time they had to traverse, our little moment of suspended existence fades into insignificance."

"You've been awake—longer than I have," Marlin confessed dazedly. "My rusty brain can't follow you."

CHAPTER XVI

THEY wandered down the coastline, the two together faring better in the hunt for small game and edible growths than either had succeeded in doing alone.

Whenever he found a scattering of the baked clay fragments, or even isolated lumps, Marlin made it a point to carry them down to the water's edge, where in due course they would add to the life of the planet. It would be splendid to locate some larger pieces. There might be something to those stories of goats and sheep trapped by the ooze. A dog would be a find.

DuChane was off hunting by himself when Marlin came upon the largest deposit of clay fragments he had yet encountered. One of the lumps was of boulder size. He studied it with mounting excitement. It might prove entirely barren, as many of the fragments did, or it might prove to contain only tiny creatures. On the other hand, it could be the chrysalis of a fairly good-sized animal.

Transporting it to the water's edge was out of the question, but Marlin solved the problem by dredging a channel through the sand and rock debris which had isolated the deposit. When the next tide rose, it poured through the channel, immersing the clay boulder, and when the tide receded, the greater part of the water remained in the pool.

He did not tell DuChane of his

discovery when they returned to camp at sundown. It would be a thrill to surprise him, if the find proved worth while.

Beyond assuring himself at intervals that the clay boulder was covered with water, there was little that Marlin could do to assist nature. From morning to morning, on various pretexts, he opposed DuChane's restless desire to move camp, while he watched the slow disintegration of the clay. Now and then he fished small creatures out of the water; others floated to the edge and revived of themselves. He was beginning to fear that the large blob contained no more than a sprinkling of such life, when, peering through the murky water, he saw a streak of lighter coloration along one side.

That it might be a human limb he refused even to hope. It seemed hairless, but often the small animals were bald in spots when they emerged, presenting a pathetically moth-eaten appearance. He could do nothing all day but watch. At sundown, DuChane made caustic observations upon his failure to contribute to their larder. Marlin scarcely bothered to offer an excuse.

Early next morning, he was back at the pool. By this time, the body within the partly disintegrated chrysalis was so definitely outlined that he could almost be certain of its human shape. The exposed portions were still hard and rigid to the touch. He restrained his impatience to break away the encrusting clay. Ex-

perience had shown that attempts to hasten the process usually resulted in injury or death to the enclosed creature. Yet by mid-afternoon enough of the deposit had dissolved to assure Marlin, not only that the body was human, but that it was quite probably feminine. The head and upper portion were still encrusted with the clay. He could only hope that they would be free by morning.

Had it not been for questions it would arouse in DuChane's mind, he would have remained all night by the pool. When he forced himself to return to camp, DuChane regarded him sourly. Suspicion mounted as Marlin set about unaccustomed preparations.

SELECTING the sharpest of his stone implements, he ground it to a still keener edge. Then, painfully and methodically, he began scraping his beard. The coming of darkness made little difference, since he was working by sense of touch. When the growth had been removed from his face, after a fashion, he hacked at his tangled locks until something that might be termed a haircut had been achieved.

Long before he had finished, DuChane was snoring, but in the morning he looked at his companion with undisguised amusement.

"Why the beauty treatment?"

"We're civilized beings," retorted Marlin defensively. "Why look like savages?"

Restraining his impatience until

he was sure DuChane had gone his own way, he gathered some food and all the animal skins they had accumulated between them and hastened to the pool.

A tide had risen and ebbed during the night, leaving the water comparatively clear. The body of the girl was floating on the surface, face and shoulders entirely freed of clay but submerged.

A desperate fear clutched Marlin's vitals. He should have been there when the last of the clay dissolved, ready to drag her clear of the water. What if the delay had allowed her to drown?

Dropping his armful of skins on a flattened rock, he plunged into the pool and bore her to the improvised couch. The skins with the softer fur he spread beneath, and with those remaining he covered the slender body.

Not until then did he look at the wan face with any impulse of curiosity. It had not especially mattered who she was. It was enough that she was a member of the human species—a girl.

Now he realized that she was Norma, the moody outlaw maiden. And with the realization came a stab of dismay.

Norma had been dead before the crash. The barest accident alone had saved her body from the incinerator. The life-maintaining clay had closed over her too late to preserve a vital spark already fled. No wonder she lay so inert and motionless.

With leaden heart, he looked down at the still features—so cold and immobile. Not until then did he realize how vehemently he had counted on bringing her into his world—how he had needed and yearned for such companionship. It had not seemed to matter who the girl was; but now he realized that he wanted Norma—that life would never be complete without her.

He touched the cheeks, the hands, the scarred neck. They were cold—cold as the stone on which she lay. And yet a sense of perplexity assailed him.

Not one fragment of inorganic life had been preserved in the clay, as far as he had discovered. It seemed to maintain all forms of life or potential life; other substances had invariably been consumed.

His clothing and everything he carried had succumbed to the disintegration, yet his body had emerged from its clay entombment unscathed—not only that, but strengthened, purified, adapted to its new environment, so that he experienced no great discomfort in a climate markedly colder than Earth's. He and DuChane had discussed this and decided that the body metabolism had been altered, making them definitely coldblooded.

If the purifying clay could do this, could it not also have drawn the poison from Norma's system, maintaining a spark of life that still persisted despite her seeming death? From the mere fact that

her body was preserved, what other conclusion was it possible to draw?

With renewed hope, Marlin set frantically about trying to establish respiration by artificial means. Was it imagination, or did he feel a slight surge of warmth in the limp body? As a last resort, he bent over the still face and blew his breath into the delicate nostrils.

A long drawn, quivering shudder swept the form. Stilling his excitement, he blew again and yet again, slowly working the arms back and forth. And presently, beyond doubt, she was breathing naturally, her flesh was taking on a glow of warmth, the long-lashed eyes opened for a second.

THROUGHOUT the morning, Marlin nursed his charge. From time to time, he moistened the pale lips with water and allowed a trickle to run into her mouth. When the sun reached its zenith, she made an effort as if to rise, and he helped her to a sitting posture.

She looked around blankly, scarce seeming to know what she saw, and aware of Marlin only as an object that moved.

She was not beautiful by Earth standards, but those standards were far away. To Marlin, her very presence was intoxicating. He could have knelt and worshipped her.

How long he had been observed, in his preoccupation, he had no way of knowing. When he glanced up at an overhanging rock-ledge above the pool, DuChane was regarding

him with sardonic amusement.

"I figured you were up to something," the man called down. "So this was the inspiration for the shave."

Marlin licked his lips, stifling a wave of apprehension.

"She's mine," he said.

DuChane circled the ledge until he found a place to descend. Making his way down slowly, he strode toward the girl—would have touched her but for a warning gesture from Marlin.

He turned abruptly.

"We may as well get this settled." His voice was harsh—his eyes had grown hard. "One of us gets her—the other doesn't."

"She's mine," Marlin repeated doggedly. "I found her—opened the channel to the tide—brought her to life."

"You want her," returned DuChane, "because she's a woman. I want her because—she's the one. I'd come to feel that way about her back in the space ark."

Filled with a blind rage, Marlin plunged toward him. DuChane carried a spear, and he raised it in defense, but in the fury of his onslaught Marlin brushed it aside and heard it clatter on the rock.

He landed a fist squarely on the other's jaw and followed it with flailing blows on face and body.

DuChane made a quick recovery. He lowered his head and bored through the barrage to get a strangling hold on Marlin's neck.

Forced to adopt similar tactics,

Marlin struggled for his opponent's throat. They fell together, thrashing over the rocky slope.

With an unexpected twist, DuChane wrenched free. Attempting to follow him, Marlin slipped on the wet rock and fell with a resounding splash into the pool. By the time he could scramble out, DuChane had recovered his spear and was warily bearing down upon him, the stone point poised for a deadly thrust.

Before the sure death presaged by the snarling features, Marlin cautiously retreated. By this time, his mind had regained its alertness. For all his rage, he realized that, unarmed, he was no match for DuChane while the latter possessed the spear.

Whirling suddenly, he made a dash for freedom. Before DuChane could hurl his shaft, he had scrambled over the edge of the embankment and was running toward camp.

Quickly, Marlin gathered all the spears belonging to their combined store. Thus fortified, he warily circled the higher ground which overlooked the pool.

DuChane was squatting before the girl, but his preoccupation was not so intent that he failed to glimpse the movement above. Instantly he was erect, spear in hand.

POISING his best shaft, Marlin flung it straight toward the other's breast. DuChane leaped aside, and the spear struck a rock behind him a glancing blow. The head

shattered, while the shaft rebounded, striking the girl.

Sick with dismay, Marlin saw her recoil and then bewilderedly attempt to rise. DuChane caught her in his arms and forced her down on the bed of skins, then turned vindictively toward the man above.

Defeated for the moment, Marlin withdrew. He could not risk throwing more spears while DuChane remained near the girl.

Throughout the rest of the day, he stalked the other. DuChane was too wary to be taken off guard. He was even supplied with rations—the delicacies Marlin had brought from camp with which to feed the girl when she regained consciousness. He saw DuChane put occasional morsels into her mouth. She swallowed, mechanically but eagerly.

Toward evening, Marlin was sure he heard her utter a few hesitant syllables in answer to DuChane's low-voiced remarks.

He kept up the siege through the night, hoping to slip down unobserved and creep up on the other man, but the night happened to be one in which the moons were both in evidence. Their radiance was sufficient to give the alert DuChane warning of his approach.

The one thing to his advantage was an unusually high tide. It drove DuChane and his charge up the slope to a position beneath the overhanging ledge. Studying the situation by the first rays of the morning sun, Marlin decided on a plan

of action.

He gained a vantage point as nearly as possible above the two. By hurling himself over the ledge, he might be able to overcome the other in a surprise attack.

Waiting until the murmur of voices below indicated that DuChane was at least partly off guard, he poised himself, spear in hand, then leaped.

It was a fall of a good twelve feet. He landed on all fours on the sloping descent, the jar breaking his hold on his spear. A sharp pain stabbed up one leg.

DuChane sprang to his feet, spear upraised, but Marlin charged toward him without hesitation.

The jagged point of the spear pierced his side, but he plowed on, forcing the other back up the slope by sheer fury of the onslaught.

Again they were at close grips, gouging, tearing, surging back and forth across the slope. Once DuChane gained a strangle hold on Marlin's throat. Fingers, hard and cruel as talons, sank deep into his windpipe. Mustering all his energy, Marlin broke the hold by forcing the other back against the rock wall and pounding his head against the jagged surface.

They broke apart, Marlin gasping for breath, DuChane shaking his shaggy head to clear it. Then, with the fury of desperation, Marlin stumbled back to the fray.

This time DuChane met the attack by hurling his body down upon him with the force of a catapult.

They hurtled down the slope together, but Marlin was beneath, and the crash of landing knocked the breath from his body.

DuChane scrambled for his spear, but when Marlin tried to rise, he found his muscles too weak to obey the demand of his will. He was faint from loss of the blood which gushed from his torn side, and the pain stabbing up from his ankle was rising to the threshold of consciousness with unbearable intensity.

With glazing eyes, he looked up to see DuChane poised for the kill.

The spear-arm hesitated. Through a throbbing haze of waning consciousness, Marlin heard the other man's voice.

"I don't want to kill you—Dave. What about it? Will you go your way and leave us in peace?"

Then blackness blotted out the scene.

CHAPTER XVII

MARLIN regained consciousness in the camp. He was stiff and weak and sick with the pain of his ankle. DuChane and the girl stood over him.

"Sorry, old man," DuChane said regretfully. "You put up a good fight, but I had the advantage."

Marlin made no reply. But in the days that followed, while slowly regaining his strength, he observed the pair. It was clear that he was definitely out of the picture. The girl, Norma, taciturn as ever, nevertheless followed DuChane with

her eyes and seemed to dwell on his every word. Daily she accompanied him on the hunt, becoming as adept as a man with spear and club.

Sometimes she returned early to prepare the evening meal. On one such occasion Marlin abruptly asked:

"You like him? You're satisfied?"

The girl, in her single brief garment of skins, dropped down beside him. She was tanned and strong-looking now, and a new radiance had replaced the old sullen look on her face.

"You found me, didn't you?" she said slowly. "It was you who gave me back to life—and I've never thanked you."

Marlin gingerly flexed his injured ankle. "Forget the thanks," he returned gruffly.

"It seems funny," she went on, "to thank you for saving me. I used to reproach you for saving me the first time, and I tried to fling away the life you'd given back. But somehow, now, it's different. I want to live! I feel somehow that I've found the place where I belong—a world where living is real and glorious, as it should be."

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"I guess you're right. Everything's as it should be."

As soon as he could walk with but a slight limp, he gathered up his spears and implements.

"I've a notion there's better hunting farther south," he observed.

DuChane avoided his eyes. Norma said nothing, but it was apparent that she wished to be alone with her man.

"I'll drop around sometimes — keep in touch with you," Marlin assured them cheerfully. "So long."

Thus casually, he set out alone in the wilderness.

FOR weeks he hunted along the shore of the murky sea. One day he picked up a shaft in which was bound a spearhead unlike any that either he or DuChane had fashioned. It was a crudely hammered thing of metal—and the red stain with which it was encrusted revealed that the metal was iron.

While he stood looking at it, a shrill vituperation startled his ears, and two figures came dashing over the ridge beyond. In the brief glimpse he had before the pursuer felled the one in advance, he was sure the victim was a woman.

She had fallen beneath the blow, but in an instant was on her feet, screaming, struggling, and scratching. Before the fury of her attack, the man retreated, and finally broke away, waving his spear ominously when she threatened to follow up the advantage.

Both became aware of Marlin at the same instant.

He walked toward them slowly. "Sally!" he called out, and then, doubtfully: "Len McGruder?"

Eyes riveted on Marlin's face, the girl approached, slowly, almost like one groping in the dark. She

touched his cheeks diffidently with both hands.

"You're Dave! Dave Marlin!" she gasped.

McGruder eyed them with fierce resentment, then lunged forward and thrust Sally away.

"Damned slut!" he growled. "Get back to your brats."

She swung on him furiously. "Shut up! I'll stay where I please."

Marlin noticed with sickened comprehension that there was an ugly welt on her temple and many bruises showed on the exposed parts of her body. But then, there were scratches and welts on McGruder that might not have been due altogether to entanglement with brush.

"You'll stay with us tonight," Sally informed Marlin. "You'll be surprised at what a good housekeeper I am."

There was no second to the invitation from McGruder, but Marlin cheerfully accompanied them home.

Their refuge, like that of Maw and Link, was a cave. In an improvised enclosure, two naked children rolled contentedly in the dirt—one about two, the other a babe in the crawling stage. Cute little brats, Marlin thought, and Sally appeared to be casually proud of them.

There was no evidence that they had attempted to cultivate growing things, but they had a fire, and Marlin was interested in the forge McGruder grudgingly showed him. He had fashioned other things besides spearheads—crude knives and

an attempt at an axe—but he jealously refused to divulge the location of his metal deposits.

As a special treat, Sally cooked a delectable stew of meat and edible roots.

During the evening, the pair staged a bitter quarrel over some trifle, in the course of which McGruder sent Sally reeling with a cuff on the side of the head and she came back tooth and nail to retaliate. Marlin refrained from taking a hand. The girl seemed able to take care of herself.

WHEN the embers of the fire burned low, Sally carried her offspring into the cave. McGruder, with a snarling remark that might have been taken for a goodnight followed her. Marlin made himself as comfortable as possible under a ledge some distance away.

He wakened at the sound of crunching sand. In an instant, Sally was beside him, her arms circling his neck. She was sobbing.

"Take me away, Dave!" she moaned. "I can't stand it. He beats me—he's a beast! It's been a living hell."

He stroked her hair gently, reveling in the soft tangle. He did not blame her for wanting to leave a brute like McGruder. In point of fact, she was voicing a thought which he had been pondering as he fell asleep.

Her lips sought his and clung, deliciously.

"Your kids," he suggested pres-

ently. "You wouldn't want to leave them. How'll we manage——?"

"I've thought it all out," she told him breathlessly. "In the morning you'll start down the coast. If he thinks you're out of the way, he'll go hunting as usual. Then you can come back and we'll slip away together."

"Suppose he follows. With two children we can't travel very fast."

"What if he does! You're strong, Dave—and unafraid. I've always admired you. He found me wandering around alone, frightened and starved, and we—well, there just wasn't anybody else. You know how it is."

"Sure," he agreed. "I don't blame you, kid."

Another clinging kiss, and she slipped away.

Marlin lay contentedly thinking of the morrow. He'd found the companionship he craved, at last. Sally was an attractive kid. In this new world, for all its hardships, she had blossomed in a full-bosomed, satisfying way. Her kisses were pleasant to recall. Now he could establish a home and live the way a man was meant to live.

That she was already encumbered with two children did not disturb him in the least. Hungering for companionship, he liked the idea of having others dependent upon him—others for whom he could work and hunt, and to whom he would mean something.

True, they were another man's children. Presumably McGruder

had some feeling for them; he couldn't be entirely lacking in human traits. Probably even cared for Sally in his way. But a scurvy brute who didn't know how to treat a woman deserved to have her run away with another man.

Involuntarily, Marlin strove to put the thought in different words. The idea of running away was repellent. Why do it by stealth? He wasn't afraid of McGruder.

Why not go up to him and say: "I'm making off with your wife and kids. What are you going to do about it?" That was better.

McGruder would put up a howl. Marlin hoped he'd be man enough to fight. Somehow, you didn't feel quite so mean about taking a man's possessions if you proved you were entitled to them by right of superior prowess.

But whether you took them by stealth or force, you'd have occasional moments of remorse. It wasn't as if——

Impatiently, Marlin twisted to his other side and tried to sleep. Thinking about it didn't help. Perhaps Sally's idea was better, after all. It wasn't the fight he wanted to avoid—it was the accusation he'd feel in the other man's eyes. Even a rat like McGruder could have moral right on his side. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

MORNING found Marlin many miles down the coast and still feverishly pushing on. Too bad he

couldn't have left some word for Sally; but she'd probably understand.

His failing to show up for breakfast would be the tipoff. She'd realize that he must have decided that he couldn't do this thing.

In the long run, she'd be glad that the father of her children still had the responsibility of caring for them. What if he did beat her occasionally? Recollection of the fight they'd staged last evening recurred to mind, and he grinned. Sally gave as good as she took. He half suspected that she enjoyed the excitement.

Still, there were her kisses and her warm vital body. Most of all, there was the hunger for companionship. It was just as well to put a lot of distance between himself and these ever-tempting possibilities.

Perhaps, if he was doomed to be alone, he might find some creature of the wild for company. The section of the shore which he was approaching really promised well.

He had supposed that the center from which most of the vegetation sprang was somewhere in the neighborhood of his emergence. Probably just a fellow's egotistical way of regarding himself as the center of the universe. Now it began to look as if this region to the south was relatively a garden spot, the older section—so far as growth was concerned.

The bushes were more luxuriant; there were even some fledgling

trees. Wild life was more abundant. He caught glimpses of rabbits and of a distant creature that might have been one of the legendary sheep which were supposed to have been trapped in the ooze before the sphere took its plunge into space.

It seemed to Marlin that even the sun shone brighter; his skin felt a gentle warmth in place of the ever-present chill. It was almost like coming home.

More and more frequently he came upon things that gladdened his spirit. Sheep there undoubtedly were, back among those rocks, and stalks of corn, not nearly as stunted as those which Link had painstakingly cultivated. Bees hummed around the blossoms of occasional flowers. At the base of a huge rock outcropping he found a nest hollowed out in a pocket of dry leaves, and in the nest were eggs—pullet eggs.

On the slope of a hillside rising from the other side of the rock was a small flock of clucking hens, scratching industriously under the supervision of a strutting cock. Off to the right a pair of goats raised their heads and blatted at him in mild astonishment.

A well-defined trail led to the crest of the outcropping. Trembling with anticipation of he knew not what, Marlin plodded up the path. Reaching the top, he paused. Something constricted his throat.

in a grassy knoll overlooking the sea. She wore a knee-length garment which seemed to be woven of plaited grass. Her long golden hair hung in loose braids over her shoulders, and she cuddled a chick to her breast, cupping it in both hands while the mother hen, with the rest of her brood, clucked at her feet. On the slope above, a black and white pup paused in the act of worrying a stick, and stood looking at the newcomer with one ear comically cocked.

Marlin stared entranced. He had no impulse to approach, but only to fill his eyes with the lovely picture she made—to feed his starved soul with the tranquility of her unconscious pose. Mature, brooding, poised—a veritable part of it she seemed—an expression of the universal mother-spirit.

When she glanced up from the fluffy thing cuddled in her hands, she seemed scarcely surprised at seeing him, but her full lips broke into a smile of pleased welcome.

As she deposited the fledgling on the ground among its mates, he took a diffident step toward her, then another.

"Pearl!" he muttered in a choked voice, and dropped on his knees beside her.

She looked down understandingly. Extending both hands, she clasped them behind his head and drew his face gently to the warm hollow where the chick had nestled.

CALM and tranquil, like an aloof goddess, she sat on a boulder

" . . . Thus N'urth came into be-

ing. But it was a fearsome planet—barren—devoid of life. Then the gods who had created it turned to Pi-Ruh-Al, the all-knowing, and besought her to make their creation more pleasing to the sight of El-Leighi.

"For know you, my son, that so great was the wisdom of this lovely goddess that for long periods she sealed her lips in mercy, lest she reveal truths too vast for mind to comprehend. Yet was she also the most tender and understanding of the Great Beings.

"In her wisdom, Pi-Ruh-Al gathered a handful of soil from the barren planet, and breathed upon it, and moistened it in the sea. And she scattered the soil and it became seeds, which blossomed into grass and flowers and all things growing, so that N'urth was converted into a place of beauty riding upon the void.

"And again Pi-Ruh-Al gathered rock fragments which she moistened in the sea and breathed upon and scattered abroad, and the rocks gave forth living things, so that the world teemed with birds and tiny creatures that crawl and fly and burrow, and with all animals that we know, from the least to great herds which feed upon the hillsides.

"With all of this the gods were pleased, but in time they again grew dissatisfied, they knew not why. And Pi-Ruh-Al smiled, for the

cause of their sorrow was known to her even before they voiced it. So she removed the seal from her lips and told them they were grieved because none of their kind would enjoy the beauty of this world or remain to husband its teeming life, when they returned to their home in the sun. And she commanded them to people N'urth with beings in their own image—children of their loins, who should hold their heads high and walk erect with understanding, as befitted the mortal children of gods.

"And the Mighty Ones knew that Pi-Ruh-Al spoke wisdom, and they obeyed her command. And now, from their far-off home in the sun, they look out upon the fair planet which they formed and peopled with life, and declare that it is good."

"Is it not true, Mother, that our own race—my race—came from the greatest of these?"

"We believe it is true, son—and ever should. For it is said that from Maha-Ra-Lin and Pi-Ruh-Al descended our splendid race, which peoples nearly half the continents of N'urth. Yet it is but natural for the other races to think highly of those from whom they sprang. All were gods—stupendous beings of high courage and noble aims, who rode the thunderbolt across the void, brought life from stones, and molded for us a world in which it is pleasant to dwell."



He had been in the cave for only a short time it seemed. But when he finally emerged the world he knew was gone. And it had left him with a strange—

IT shone as a pin-point of silver far away in the midnight-blackness of the cave. It shone as a tiny island of life in a sea of death. It shone as a symbol of His mercy.

Martin stood swaying, staring wide-eyed at that wonderful light and letting its image sink deep into his vision. His eyes lidded as consciousness faded for an instant, then opened.

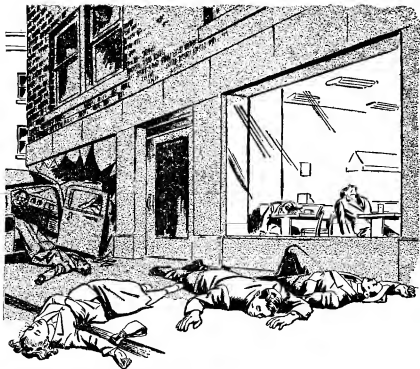
"We've almost made it," he gasped. "We've almost made it, Sandy, you and me and the pup!"

His hand passed tenderly over the puppy, a soft, hairy ball of living warmth cradled in his arm. And from out of the darkness at his feet came a feeble bark.

Martin choked on the ancient, tomb-stale air. "We can't stop now, Sandy," he wheezed. "We're almost there, almost at the entrance!"

He shuffled forward over the cold stone floor of the little cave, the thick, dead air a solid thing, a wall that pressed him back, back, back.

But the light grew larger, ex-



INHERITANCE

By
Edward W. Ludwig

panding like a balloon, and suddenly there was a skittering of dog-paws over stone and a joyous, frantic barking.

"That's right, Sandy, go ahead. Breathe that air, that fresh air!"

Martin staggered once, his lean, tall body thudding against sharp rock in the side of the cave. Then a draft of air blew cool and fresh into his face, and a strength returned to him.

Abruptly, he was at the source

of the light, at the cave's entrance, a hole barely large enough for him to squeeze through. The blinding light of day fell upon him like a gigantic, crashing sea wave. He closed his aching eyes and fell to the side of the rock-strewn hill, sucking the clean sweet air deep into his lungs.

AT length he sat up, holding the pup in his arms. "Two days in that hole of hell," he murmured,

"and it's all your fault. A month old, and you have to start exploring caves."

He cocked his head. "Still, I guess it's partly my fault. After all, I got lost, too."

Sandy, a black and white fox terrier, barked impatiently.

"Okay, Sandy, okay. We'll go home."

Shakily, Martin rose. His mind was clear now, the fogginess washed away by the cool morning air. There was only hunger, that great gnawing hunger, and thirst that made his throat and mouth seem as dry as ancient parchment.

As he stood overlooking the valley below with its green fields and little groves of trees, a realization came to him. The world wasn't so bad after all! Up to this moment, he'd almost hated the world with its wars, its threats of mass destruction, its warnings of atomic dusts and plagues that could wipe out humanity within an hour. He'd most certainly hated the cities with their blaring, rumbling automobile-monsters, with their mad rushing, their greedy, frantic, senseless, superficial living that was really not living at all.

That was why he had chosen to live in the hill country, on the outskirts of the village, raising his few vegetables and making a trip every few days to the village store to purchase other necessities with his pension check from World War II.

But now, he realized, it was good to be alive and to be a part of the

green, growing things of Earth.

Sandy barked again.

"Okay, okay, Sandy. We'll go."

But Sandy came sidling up to him now, tail between his legs. His barking faded to a low, shrill whimper.

"Sandy! What's the matter? What's wrong?"

Even the whimpering ceased, and there was silence. Martin stared at the dog, not understanding. To him came a *feeling*. Something *was* wrong. A nameless fear rose within him, but the cause of that fear was intangible, locked just below the surface of consciousness.

He took the fear, crushed it, pushed it back into the caverns of his mind that held only forgotten things. "Nothing's wrong," he declared boldly. "We're just tired and hungry, that's all."

He strode down the quiet hillside toward the broad highway that stretched across the valley. He sang:

*"We're happy, so happy,
Don't want to reach a star;
We're happy, always happy,
Just the way we are."*

Strange about that tune, he thought. He hated popular music, but in a regrettable moment of optimism he'd once purchased a second-hand battery video. After a three-day saturation with tooth paste and soap commercials he'd consigned the monstrosity to a remote corner of the woods, but that tune—of all the dubious products of civilization—had somehow stuck

in his memory.

Suddenly he stopped singing, as if some inexplicable pressure had seized his throat, stopping the flow of words. It was quiet—so incredibly, alarmingly, terrifyingly quiet. Just ahead of him was the highway, its gray smooth ribbon clearly visible through a thin wall of elms. But there was no swish-swish of speeding cars.

And there were no bird twitterings and no insect hummings and no skitterings of squirrels at the bases of trees and no droning of gyro-planes. There was only silence.

He broke out onto the highway which was dotted with cars, and the cars were motionless. Some of them were crushed, charred wrecks on the side of the road; some had collided in the center of the road to become ugly little mountains of twisted metal, and others were simply parked. But all were motionless.

"Come on, Sandy. Something's happened!"

Sandy wouldn't come. He arched his trembling body across Martin's legs, whimpering. Martin picked him up. Sandy in one arm, the drowsy-eyed pup in the other, he walked to the nearest car, which appeared undamaged.

There were three occupants. A man, a woman, a girl-child, and they were as if sleeping. No wounds, no discolorations were on their flesh. But their flesh was cold, cold, and there were no heart beats.

They were dead.

"We—We won't go home yet," Martin said softly. "We'll go to the village."

He walked. He walked past a hundred, a thousand silent cars with silent occupants, past green meadows that were dotted with silent, fallen cattle and sheep and horses.

There was a new fear within him now, but even greater than the fear was a numbness that like a sleep-producing drug had dulled mind and vision and hearing. He walked stiffly, automatically. He was afraid to think and reason, for thought and reason could bring only — madness.

"At the village we'll find out what happened," he mumbled.

At the village he found out — nothing. Because there, too, was only a silence and the white, still people.

"Perhaps in the city—" he murmured. "Yes, the city."

The City was 20 miles away, and he selected an automobile, one in which there were no still people. It had been a long time since he'd driven, nearly ten years, but after a few moments of fumbling, remembrance came easily. With Sandy and the pup on the front seat beside him, he drove. . . .

THE City was as empty as an ancient skull. There was no life and no reminder of life. There were no still people and no automobiles and no movement and no

sound. The towering white office buildings, the broad avenues, the theatres, the parks—all seemed hollow and unreal, like a desert mirage that would dissolve into nothingness at the whispering touch of a breeze.

Martin mumbled, "I reckon, Sandy, that everybody left the City. They headed for the country. That's why we passed so many cars."

He spied the office of *The Times*. "Maybe we can find out something in there," he said. "Come on, Sandy. Pup, you stay here."

He parked the car and strode into the building, past desks, cabinets, typewriters, stacked bundles of newspapers.

Then he saw the man. He was one of the silent men, sprawled back in a chair, a typewriter before him. He had been writing, evidently, for one stiff, white hand was still poised over the keys.

Martin read the typewritten words aloud:

"The enemy had apparently underestimated the power of the odorless, tasteless gas. A Nitrogen compound of extreme volatility, it has reached virtually every inch of the Earth. The enemy is destroyed as we are destroyed. Gas masks and air filters have proved useless. The gas is highly unstable and should disintegrate within 48 hours, yet because of the suddenness of the attack, we can conclude only that humanity is——" The message broke off.

Suddenly the newsroom was like

a tomb, a burial of all mankind's accomplishments and frustrations, his good-doings and evil-doings. Here into this room had flowed, ceaseless as a river, the stories of man's love, hate, struggle, fear, grasping, success, and disappointment. Side by side they lay in the labyrinth of files, the stories of Mrs. Smith's divorce and a dictator's defeat, the sagas of a child losing a pet and a scientist discovering a star. All equal now, as skeletons of great men and little men are equal, all buried in steel drawers and sealed by silence.

Martin looked at the stiffened figure of the reporter. "I wonder why you stayed," he mused. "I wonder why you didn't flee like the others. Maybe, maybe you wanted to write the *last* news story ever written—and the most important one. Yes, I reckon that was it."

Slowly, Martin walked out of the building and slid into the car. Sandy welcomed him with a joy-filled barking and tail-wagging and tried to lick his face, and the pup attempted to waddle across his legs.

"No, Sandy, don't." He stared unseeingly through the windshield. "Everybody's gone, Sandy, everybody on Earth, except me." His eyes widened slightly. "Course, there *might* be somebody else, somewhere. The gas never got to us in the cave. Maybe somebody else escaped, somehow."

He shook his head. "Nope, no use hoping for that. Odds'd be a

thousand to one 'gainst my finding 'em. No, we just got to make up our minds that we're the last ones alive."

The last ones alive. The thought was like flame in his mind. The numbness was gone now, as coldness thaws from a warmed body, but there came to him a second thought, a horrible, fear-born thought which he dared not say aloud, even to Sandy.

A man can't live alone, without hearing another human voice, without seeing another human form. A man isn't made that way. You've got two choices now, just two: Suicide or madness. Which will it be? Suicide or madness, suicide or madness. .

HE sat for a long, long time, his mind a jumble of indecision. Then at last he thought, *I don't want to go mad, the other way is best. We'll make it easy. Carbon monoxide would be the easiest way.*

But suddenly there was a churning and a twisting in his stomach, as though it were being squeezed by a giant hand.

"Golly, Sandy, we forgot to eat. And we haven't eaten for two days." And to himself he said, *This'll be our last meal, the last we'll ever have.*

He took the pup in his arms and Sandy followed. He spied a huge sign not far away—*Cafe Royale*. It was a magnificent restaurant, the carpeted, canopied entrance reminding him of the front of a sul-

tan's palace. Three days ago—if he'd been foolish enough to come to the City then—he'd have rushed past it with his hand protecting his pocketbook, hardly daring to look within lest the stiff-shirted, high-chinned waiters and patrons think him a country bumpkin.

But now—well, why not?

He ambled through the vast dining hall with its multitude of white-clothed tables, its potted palms, its modernistic, chromium bar. The high walls were decorated with soft-hued, multi-colored murals depicting the rise of Western Civilization—first, the pioneers, the cowboys, then a factory scene and a war scene, and finally a group of spacemen entering a moon-bound rocket.

Martin made a wheezing sound of admiration. "What a place, eh, Sandy? We should have come here a long time ago."

Then he spied the juke box. "There's one of them music machines—and it's lit up. Reckon the power's still on."

Martin had always wanted to play a juke box, but nickels, back home, were scarce. He pursed his lips. "Why not, Sandy? Nickels don't mean much now, and if this is going to be our last meal, we might as well enjoy it."

He inserted a quarter, and after a few moments of pushing this and that button, music played. It was "Song of The Stars," the latest hit, vibrant, full, rhythmic—not at all like the screeching from the second-

hand video he'd owned once.

While he listened, he strode to the bar. Not that he was a drinking man. He occasionally had a cold beer on Saturday evening; that was all. But now, with that dazzling array of bottles glittering before him—"Nobody'll miss it now," he told Sandy.

He poured himself three fingers of Scotch and downed it thirstily. "Ahhhhh! Been a long time since I had anything like that. Now let's see what's in that kitchen."

Electricity was still on. Refrigerators were humming, and Martin's gaze wandered appraisingly over red, juicy T-bones, over dressed chickens, turkeys, rabbits, hams.

"Reckon we're too hungry to wait for chicken," he drawled. "Guess T-bones'd be nice for a last meal. How about it, Sandy?"

Sandy barked.

Dinner was soon ready. Fried T-bone, mashed potatoes and dark gravy, caviar, some kind of soup with a fishy taste, apple pie with strawberry ice cream, chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream, maple nut, tuiti-fruiti and pineapple ice cream, and coffee.

Martin settled back and puffed on a 50c cigar. "You know, Sandy, it wouldn't always be like this. In a couple of weeks there won't be any more power. Food will spoil, there'll be only canned stuff."

He frowned thoughtfully. Perhaps he'd been wrong. Perhaps suicide was not the best way. He could have a few pleasures in the

next day or two—if madness didn't come. And if madness did start to come, well. . . .

IT was a sleek, streamlined jet job, the automobile of automobiles. Not an antiquated monstrosity like the '51 coupe he'd been driving.

He stared through the window at its tear-drop lines, at its broad, transparent top, at the shiny chrome and gold.

"We shouldn't be thinking about such things, Sandy. We should be thinking about all those people, those poor people who died. All the men and women and children—"

For an instant, grief welled up within him, a cold, almost sickening grief. But abruptly, it became an impersonal, remote kind of grief. It was like a Fourth of July rocket shooting out a blinding tail of crimson and then bursting, its body crumbling into a thousand pieces, a thousand tiny sparks falling and fading and dying.

"Still, they knew it was coming, didn't they, Sandy? And they didn't try very hard to stop it."

He looked again at the car. "Reckon it won't do any harm to see how it runs. After all, if we're goin' mad, we might as well enjoy ourselves first."

* * *

The window display in the sport shop fascinated him. There were guns and fishing rods and fur-lined jackets and shiny boots and bright woolen shirts and sun goggles and camp stoves and—

"Don't reckon the guns'd do us much good," Martin murmured, "seein' as how there's nothing left alive—'cept us. Might be fun to shoot 'em though. I remember when I was a kid, how I used to shoot windows out of old houses." He chuckled softly.

His gaze traveled to the fishing equipment. "Golly, Sandy, I'll bet there's fish left in the oceans! The gas never touched us there in the cave. I'll bet the fish—or a lot of 'em—escaped, too!"

He glanced disapprovingly at his thin, faded shirt, dirty khaki trousers, and worn, scuffed shoes. Those clean, bright, woolen clothes in the window would be nice, very nice, on cool nights.

"Might even have dog clothes in there," he said. "Maybe a dog sweater. How'd you like that, Sandy?"

Sandy barked eagerly.

HE squatted on the floor of the travel office, surrounded by a sea of crisp, gaudy-colored posters and pamphlets. What a place this old Earth was! The pyramids of Egypt, the Tower of London, the Washington Monument, the Florida Everglades, the Arch of Triumph, the Eiffel Tower, Yosemite Valley, Boulder Dam, the Wall of China, Yellowstone Park, Suez Canal, Panama Canal, Niagara. Why, it would take a lifetime to see them all!

"You know, Sandy, if a man *didn't* go mad from being alone, he

could see a lot of things. He could travel anywhere on this continent in a car. If something went wrong, he could get parts out of other cars, get gas out of other tanks. There's plenty of canned food everywhere, 'nough to last a lifetime—a dozen lifetimes. Why, he could walk right into Washington, right into the White House and see how the President lived, or go to Hollywood and see how they used to make pictures, or go to them telescope places and look at the stars. Course, there'd be bodies almost everywhere, but in a year or so they'd be gone, all 'cept the bones which never hurt nobody."

He scratched his neck thoughtfully. "Why, you wouldn't have to stay on this continent even. You could find a little boat and sail up the coast to Alaska and then cut across to Asia. It's only fifty miles, they say. And then you could go down to China and India and Africa and Europe. Why, a man could go any place in the world alone!"

Sandy began to lick his face and the pup released a nervous, eager bark that was more like "Yip! Yip!" than a bark.

"That's right, Sandy. I'm not alone, am I? No more than I ever was, really. Never liked to talk to people anyway. You're only two years old, you'll live for ten, maybe twelve years yet, you and the pup. Maybe longer than I will."

He rose, frowning. It was strange.

There was a grief and a loneliness within him and he knew they would be within him forever. But, too, there was an ever-growing peace and contentment and a satisfaction, and a sense of still belonging to Earth and being a part of it. Strangest of all, he realized that there was no madness in his mind and no seed of madness. He felt like a boy again, about to begin a wondrous journey through unexplored

and enchanted lands to discover new marvels.

He left the travel office, Sandy and the pup barking and clammering at his heels, and he was singing:

*"We're happy, so happy,
Don't want to reach a star;
We're happy, always happy,
Just the way we are . . ."*

THE END

PERSONALS

Burton R. Terrell, Pekin, Ind. would like to hear from anyone who has seen flying disks or believes that invisible beings walk the earth . . . Roger Nelson, 627 Robinson, San Diego, Calif. has a collection of sf and fantasy books which he is selling 3/\$1 and has some magazines to sell or trade. He wants copies of books by Cummings, Wheatley, Kline, Stapledon and Merritt . . . Guy A. Goselin, Gorham, N. Hamp. wants to correspond with amateur astronomers . . . Carl H. Geist, 2323 W. Ainslie St., Chicago 25, Ill. has for sale Unknown Worlds 1948 Anthology, AS March thru Sept. 1948, FA Oct. '44, Mar. '48, May thru Sept. '48 and the first 8 issues starting May, 1939 . . . Fans wishing to join The Science-Fantasy Society write to Calvin T. Beck, Box 877, Grand Central Station, New York 17, N.Y. If you live in or near Cleveland, O., ask Cal for information on the Cleveland chapter of the S.F.S. . . . The Universal Musketeers, an up-and-coming fan club announces that it has a free library for the use of members, as well as five fanzines which all members receive free. Interested fans should write Ronald Friedman, 1980 E. 8th St., Brooklyn 23, N.Y. If you live in the vicinity of Norfolk, Suffolk, Newport News, Richmond or Tidewater, Virginia get

in touch with Jack Schwab, 58 Greene Blvd., Portsmouth, Va. . . Wanted, by F. J. Ackerman, 236½ N. New Hampshire, Hollywood 4, Calif., Canadian WT '33-'38; Science & Invention. Aug. '23, Dec. '24; stills from The Sky Splitter, Just Imagine, Metropolis, Our Heavenly Bodies, By Rocket to the Moon, Mysterious Island, RUR, High Treason, First Men in the Moon; addresses of Slater La-Master, Albert DePina, Cordwainer Smith, Ree Dragonette, Leslie Rubenstein, Evi Detring-Nathan, Andrew Lenard, Eleanor McGeary; issues of Orchideengarten, Thrill Book, Fantastica, Shuster & Siegel's Science Fiction, first 2 yrs. Buck Rogers Sunday strips; any gold or silver artwork by Paul; Science Fiction League lapel emblem; Science Fiction Ass'n. rocket tie; \$1,000,000 to keep up with science-fiction . . . Will trade Weapon Makers, Outsider, Futuria Fantasia, Acolytes, Worm Ouroboros, Fantazia Mallare for—what rarities have you? The case of the Baroque Baby Killer: Bradbury, 5c; The Mystery of the 33 Stolen Idiots: Keller, 50c Invasion from Mars text; Welles, 15c; Monsters of the Moon, Scientifillemento, 25c; Fan Artists Portfolio. 75c; Bok Artfolio, \$1.50. Contact Weaver Wright, Box 6151 Metro Station, Los Angeles 55, Calif. . . .



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LETTER PAGE . . .

CHET GEIER SAYS . . .

Dear Ray:

I have a special reason for feeling proud to be included in this first issue of IMAGINATION. I remember about a decade ago when I was first breaking into writing that it was you who gave me my first encouragement—and check! A lot has happened since then—for you and me. I've been lucky enough to please the readers of science and fantasy fiction with my stories in a great number of magazines over the years, and you've made the big advancement from editor to editor-publisher.

In "The Soul Stealers" I've tried to capture some of the mood and dignity that I am sure your new magazine is intended to represent. If I've succeeded at all in doing this I shall be very happy. But one thing I do know, and say in all sincerity: I am proud and honored to be included in this first issue—and hope to appear here again. In the meantime, all the best.

Chester S. Geier
1716 Leland Ave.
Chicago, Ill.

All we'd like to say, Chet, is that you're being very modest in speaking of your own work. We know, as do the readers of this and all other sf magazines, that the name of Chet Geier on a story is a guarantee of the best! As to the future—we hope and intend to have you as a steady contributor . . . Rap.

NEWS OF THE NORWESCON

Dear Mr. Palmer:

Since IMAGINATION will reach a great many lovers of science fiction and fantasy we have not been

able to contact thus far, we would appreciate it if you would pass the following message onto them through your pages.

Nearly everyone who reads science fiction has become aware of some aspect of science fiction fandom. Some have entered into some phase of it, to their enjoyment; others have held back, either mildly curious or not certain how they would be received. There are many phases of fantasy fandom, but nearly all reach their zenith in the annual World Science Fiction Conventions. The eighth of these, the NORWESCON, will be held in Portland Oregon, over the Labor Day weekend, September 1st through the 4th.

There are four days there where authors and editors will meet with the readers and fans to present their opinions and listen to the other side of the picture.

There will be a wide variety of material on the program: speeches on all phases of fantasy interest, question and answer periods, forums and panel discussions, displays and demonstrations as well as a wide variety of other entertainment. There will be the traditional banquet and an auction where you may buy original artwork from IMAGINATION and OTHER WORLDS and other magazines, as well as rare books and other items you will want to own.

There will be a masked ball with prizes for the best costumes and with entertainment interspersed with the dancing.

But the actual program is just the beginning. By far the most memorable part of any convention is the people you meet. Imagine discussing his latest story with your favorite author — swapping information on

pen-names with others — those bull sessions on everything from Null-A semantics to nuclear physics and from trends in science fiction to witchcraft.

You will meet scores of people you will feel at home with on sight, and many of the meetings will turn into lasting friendships. It's something that has to be experienced to be believed. Suffice it to say, I attended the 1946 Convention, the PACIFICON, in Los Angeles, mostly out of curiosity. After meeting the people I did, I came home and started the Portland Science Fantasy Society which eventually obtained the convention for Portland.

The NORWESCON is not just for "Insiders." It is for *all* fandom; the writers, the editors, the readers column letter contributors; the collectors, and the fanzine editors—and most of all, for you!

To put on each convention, a new organization is formed and the preliminary expenses are taken care of through membership in this convention committee. Membership in the NORWESCON committee costs only \$1.00 and in addition to knowing that you are doing your part to support science fiction's greatest annual event you will receive for your dollar, the following: A membership card lithographed on fluorescent stock that is the most unique card you have ever seen; a supply of NORWESCON gummed stickers (8 designs) to dress up your letters; all issues of the NORWESCON NEWS giving full details about the NORWESCON as they are available, and a copy of the Souvenir NORWESCON Program Book. In addition, the names and addresses of all members will be published in the NORWESCON NEWS.

To support the NORWESCON,

send your dollar for membership to: NORWESCON, Box 8517, Portland 7, Oregon—then come out for the time of your life!

Donald B. Day
Chairman,
NORWESCON
Box 8517
Portland 7, Ore.

We're more than glad to offer this space to announcing the coming World Science Fiction Convention, Don. And to all of you readers, believe us, if you send your dollar to the Convention Committee you will be doing a great service toward helping further the interests of science fiction fandom. Even if you can't get to the Convention in person send in your dollar as a tribute to the field of literature you favor. As to the NORWESCON itself, one of your editors will be there to meet all of you who can make it to Portland. We're looking forward to it right now . . . Rap.

A WORD FROM ROG PHILLIPS

Dear Rap:

Congratulations are always in order when a first issue of a science fiction magazine appears on the newsstands. But I'd like to add an additional word here, if I may, for I consider IMAGINATION not just a new magazine—I sincerely believe it will prove to be one of the—if not the leader in the field.

I like the quality of the book, not only in the appearance, but the makeup as well. And I'm sure that succeeding issues will only tend to raise the high level of this first one.

Rog Phillips
Evanston Hotel
Evanston, Ill.

Thanks a lot Rog, and your stories will share in the high honors you predict for us . . . Rap.

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Due to the unexpected demand for IMAGINATION at the newsstands, and its instantaneous popularity, we are unable to anticipate local needs, and therefore many stands receive insufficient copies. You may not get future issues if you get there too late. And we will be unable to get enough returns to supply mail orders for back issues. To avoid such disappointment, why not take advantage of the special subscription rates offered below. Simply fill out the coupon below and send it with your remittance to us. We will take care of the rest. And remember, as a subscriber you will be receiving IMAGINATION promptly, and at a great saving—you actually will save ten cents a copy.

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ROCKETSHIP

"X-M"

(Continued from Inside Front Cover)

The crew of the Rocketship X-M experience the discomfiture of nosebleeds and unconsciousness as a burst of speed in space changes the course of the vessel.



The star, Osa Massen, studies aspects of interplanetary flight as pictured in **DESTINATION MOON**, scientifiilm featured in May 1950 **OTHER WORLDS**.



Above, blind Martian girl is guided by radiation-scarred bronze giants, remnants of the Red Planet's atomic war.



To the left, the crew of the X-M explore the rugged terrain of Mars, some 50,000,000 miles distant from their home planet.

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A FLYING DISK ?

Do you wonder if there is life on Mars? What is the truth about Spiritualism? Is there really a life after death? What new discoveries are being made by scientists about mental telepathy—ghosts—other planets—insanity—extra-sensory-perception—forecasting the future? What do people really believe in, but are afraid to admit because of fear of ridicule or even worse? Do the stars really determine your future? What is a mystic? What secrets lie in Tibet—in Big Business—in Russia? Where did Man really come from? Have you ever attended a seance? Do dreams really mean something?

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